

A DELL BOOK
DELL
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ROBIN HILL

Lida Larrimore



A DELL ROMANCE

ROBIN HILL

Persons this *Love Story* is about—

SHIRLEY PENFIELD,

brown-haired, blue-eyed, and breathtakingly pretty, loves Robin Hill, the rambling stone house which has been her home since childhood. And in her loyal little heart she loves all the people of Robin Hill, but above all Lee loves

RICHARD PENFIELD,

the third Richard Penfield to live at Robin Hill. Rickey is a law student at Harvard. He is handsome, blond, charming, very gay, and perhaps a little bit spoiled.

ELEANOR PENFIELD,

Lee's cousin and the mistress of Robin Hill, is a very decorative widow, but not a very practical one, and business affairs tend to bewilder her. Her life is devoted to herself and to Robin Hill and to Rickey, but chiefly to Rickey.

AUNT HARRIET,

who was born in a front bedroom at Robin Hill, has three chins and a pointed tongue, but life has taught her a great deal and she usually understands what goes on about her. She is always capable of doing what has to be done.

ELAINE ARCHER,

has silky black hair, tilted eyes, very red lips, and dark, honey-colored skin. She is very beautiful, and she is looking for something good in the way of a husband. She finds Rickey's charm hard to resist.

JOHN WALTON,

the architect grandson of the first Richard Penfield's law partner. He is tall, lean, dark, and nice-looking, but not handsome. He is older than Lee, and wiser, and her refusal to marry him does not spoil his life.

JAMES CONNELL,

a rugged, wealthy, but lonely business man from Chicago. He wants Eleanor Penfield and a home of his own.

JUDY TOMLINSON,

Lee's former roommate is now an artist. She is a mischievous but thoroughly competent cherub, with a snub nose and a mop of sandy hair. She has courage and independence and a mind and will of her own.

ROBIN HILL

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Robin Hill

Chapter One: RICKEY IS COMING HOME!

LEE STOLE quietly down the stairs and out through the sun-porch door. It was earlier than she had thought. Dew-drops, catching the sunshine, still clung to lacy cobwebs. The arbor vines, as she brushed them lightly, dropped sudden crystal showers. A spray of blossoms touched her cheek. She paused to smell them, loving their fragrance, loving the cool touch of the leaves. Oh, beautiful morning and beautiful world! Rickey was coming home.

Rickey was coming home! Last night there had been a telegram—*Home tomorrow. Bringing a guest.* She hadn't been able to sleep for thinking of Rickey and wondering who the guest would be, but mostly for thinking of Rickey. She had sat, until very late, on the window-seat in her room, feeling happy and excited, seeing small, clear pictures against the dark: Rickey coming downstairs to breakfast, his blond head sleek from a shower; Rickey stretched out in a deck-chair under the linden, blowing smoke rings into the air; Rickey leaning against the piano while she sang for him the gay little songs that he liked: Rickey—

But she had told Cousin Eleanor she couldn't

sleep because the night was so warm.

Cousin Eleanor couldn't sleep either. She came into the room with her hair falling in braids down over a soft negligee and her feet in tiny satin mules fluffy with rosebuds and lace. Looking pretty and young in the moonlight that sifted in through the elm trees, too young to be Rickey's mother. As daintily plump as a cream-white dove, she sat with Lee and talked about tomorrow.

Who would the guest be? she had asked, not expecting an answer. What time did Lee think they would arrive, driving in Rickey's car? Should they have supper outdoors, if tomorrow was fair, or dinner inside with squab and mushrooms and Susie's raspberry whips? Would Lee mind doing the silver? Susie was sure to be cross, with company this hot weather and the pain in her back so bad. And would she please speak to Thalia again? Rickey would be dreadfully mortified if the silly girl lost her head and served as she had when the Careys were there, forgetting which was right and left and bringing the salad before Mrs. Carey had more than sampled her sweet-breads.

Cousin Eleanor's voice had rippled on, darting from worry to worry. But they weren't real worries, Lee had thought, only half hearing the list of woes, watching the apricot moon float up above the elm tops. Cousin Eleanor wasn't distressed, just then, even if servants were not what

they used to be and the fountain hadn't been mended and the cleaners had ruined her cream lace dress getting grass stains out of the hem. Her voice made a song of complaining words and her eyes had a soft, happy shine, for Rickey was the love of her life and Rickey was coming home.

And now "tomorrow" was today. . . . Lee continued her walk under the arbor, her feet on the flagstones keeping time to the tune that hummed through her head. She was glad she had wakened early. It would be pleasant to gather the flowers while the garden was cool. Flowers for Rickey's welcoming! The humming changed in- to song—

"The animals had a fair,

The birds and the beasts were there—"

What had recalled that jingling tune? Smiling, Lee stooped to pick up a pear lying ripe and yellow and bursting with juice on the grass beneath the pear tree. Thinking of Rickey, she supposed. They had loved it when they were children. Cousin Eleanor used to play it for them with a great deal of ripple and splash.

That was a long time ago. She was twenty, now, and Rickey was twenty-three. She didn't feel twenty this morning. It didn't seem possible that Rickey had only one year more in law school, that she was going to New York in the fall and

have voice lessons with Madame Lucia and live with Judy Tomlinson, her boarding-school roommate, in a studio apartment somewhere near Washington Square. All of that seemed fantastic—like something she might have dreamed. Only familiar things were real. Rickey was coming home.

Taking juicy bites of the pear, Lee followed the walk which led to the tool-house, half buried under its mantle of blue wisteria blossoms. The pear tasted very good. She wished she had filled her pockets. Breakfast, this morning, would be hurried because of preparations for Rickey and his guest. Happiness made her hungry. It wasn't romantic, she had to admit, but it was, undoubtedly, true.

Breakfast! What was it she should have remembered? Something about this morning—

How lovely it was out of doors! Birds were singing everywhere. Lee sang, too—softly, under her breath—

"The animals had a fair,

The birds and the beasts were there.

The gay baboon

By the light of the moon

Was curling his auburn hair—"

Stopping at the edge of the garden, she turned instinctively to gaze back at the house. Familiar

as it was, the sight made her catch her breath.

She loved Robin Hill, the rambling stone house that fitted so snugly the contours of the hill, the green-roofed barn and carriage-house, the trees that seemed to touch the sky, the gardens, the meadows sloping down to the road, the brook, the springhouse under the willows.

She had loved it as a child when she first came to live in the old stone house after Father and Mother had died—before that, even, for Father had lived at Robin Hill as a boy and had told her stories about it. The first time she rode under the maples that bordered the drive, a shy little girl sitting up very straight beside Grandfather Penfield in a carriage drawn by a horse named Bess, she had felt that she was coming home.

She loved Robin Hill. But it was beginning to look run-down. Lee's eyes strayed here and there noticing signs of neglect. The trees needed trimming, that was sure, and oh, such a riot of weeds! Half the glass in the greenhouse was broken where the old cherry tree fell on it and hadn't been taken away. Grass was sprouting between the flagstones. The steps that led down to the garden were fenced with a twisted tangle of vines.

It hadn't mattered before this summer, with only herself and Cousin Eleanor there. Aunt Harriet was there, too, of course, and Judy for two short visits. She hadn't really noticed the

state that things were in. But Rickey was coming home. Seeing Robin Hill through Rickey's eyes, through the eyes of Rickey's guest, it looked weedy and neglected.

It had been lovely once, when the changes were made after Grandfather Penfield died. Then the wings, the sun-porch and the side veranda had been added to the house. The garden had been terraced and the gardener's cottage had been built in the orchard on the west slope of the hill, a cottage with casement windows like a house in a fairy tale.

There had been horses in the stable, then, and a black groom named Jerry. The lawns had been carpets of velvet and the fountain in the lily pond had sent up jets of spray, rainbow-colored in the sunshine, white against the hemlock hedge. MacDonald's tulips had won prizes at all the flower shows and, in the winter, there had been violets in the greenhouse, the big, dark, sweet-smelling ones Cousin Eleanor loved, and spicy winter carnations and hyacinths and roses.

The house had been done over inside, not changed, just made more beautiful, and photographers had come to take pictures of the stairway, the paneled dining-room, the sun-porch that opened on the paved circle under the linden. It had been exciting to see the pictures in magazines and usually, somewhere, there was Cousin Eleanor, looking as though she hadn't known her

picture was being taken, and in letters under-
neath—

MRS. RICHARD GOULD PENFIELD, II
THE CHARMING MISTRESS
OF
ROBIN HILL

That was before Cousin Richard died, suddenly, five years ago . . .

Lee threw the pear core down the old well, heard faintly a distant splash. There had been many changes since. If she looked down across the meadow, there, at the right, was the roof of the Careys' house to remind her that part of the estate no longer belonged to Robin Hill. And there, at the left, was the Dowling place, all huge white pillars and marble nymphs and bridges across the brook.

Lee remembered how sorry she had been when Cousin Eleanor sold the land. Cousin Eleanor had cried—in a bewildered sort of way. She couldn't understand the muddle that things were in. There had always been plenty of money. Where had it gone, so suddenly, after dear Richard's death?

Old Judge Walton, Grandfather's friend, had tried very hard to explain. Cousin Eleanor scarcely listened. Speculations, mortgages, loans were merely mystifying words. She hadn't a head

for business, she repeated over and over. Couldn't they talk about something more cheerful? Perhaps the Judge would like a glass of sherry. There were bottles in the cellar covered with cobwebs. And weren't the tulips nicer than ever this spring?

Judge Walton gave up in despair. "The woman's hopeless," Lee overheard him remark to Aunt Harriet, who was a crony of his. "Spoiled!" had been Aunt Harriet's tart reply. "Richard was always a fool about Eleanor Paige. Much good it did him," she had added; "he played second-fiddle all his life."

Changing the subject to cheerful topics had not straightened out the muddle of Cousin Richard's affairs. Cousin Eleanor sold sections of the meadow land. And the whole sad business upset her so that she was obliged to take Rickey to Europe the summer the Careys started to build.

"Richard would have wished us to go," she told Judge Walton when he protested against the expense. "He wanted us to be happy."

Now, Lee thought, Cousin Eleanor liked having neighbors. She and Mrs. Carey were friends and the Dowlings' chauffeur was always driving up with hot-house grapes and sheaves of opulent roses. Cousin Eleanor accepted the offerings as a Queen might accept a gift from the humblest of her subjects. It pleased her to patronize, graciously, people with so much money. . . .

*"The monkey he got drunk
And sat on the elephant's trunk—"*

She ought, Lee supposed, watching a bird with a speckled breast balance himself on the moss-covered rim of the well, to be sad because Robin Hill was beginning to look run-down. But she couldn't feel sad this morning. The sky was so blue, and that jingling tune kept humming through her head. She would play it for Rickey tonight—perhaps. She would ask him if he remembered.

Still, something ought to be done about the blown-down tree. It looked so forlorn with its splintered trunk and its branches sticking in through the broken glass in the greenhouse. And the weeds *were* disgraceful.

Lee went, hurrying, to the tool-house, resolved to be firm with Jake. But she knew that she wouldn't be. She felt too happy, too bubbling inside.

What was it she should have remembered? Something about this morning—

Chapter Two: LEE FORGETS A DATE

SNAPDRAGONS lay in the basket Lee had brought from the tool-house, larkspur blue as the summer sky, yellow daisies, rose-colored phlox, a white

mist of baby's breath.

Lee wandered among the rose bushes on the upper terrace of the garden. She knew that she ought to hurry back to the house. This was no morning for dreaming. A few more roses and then she would go.

It was hard to find perfect blooms. Most of the roses were wormy. Insects had nibbled their petals and made brittle lacework of the leaves. What would MacDonald think if he could see the gardens now? But MacDonald was working for people in Germantown. The orchard cottage was vacant. There was only Jake to do everything. And Jake was getting old and slow. He had domestic troubles, too. Small, black, wasp-like Susie led him a merry chase.

"Lee and I will take care of the flowers," Cousin Eleanor said when they had let MacDonald go.

Cousin Eleanor hadn't helped much. Sometimes she pottered about, wearing a shade-hat and gloves, and nearly drove Jake to distraction by pulling up plants under the mistaken impression that they were weeds. But the destruction was not extensive. Cousin Eleanor's fits of gardening usually dwindled into picking a cluster of sweet-peas or a rose to pin at her waist.

Snip! went Lee's scissors through thorny stems. Most of them had to be thrown away. The petals fell as she touched them, or beetles clung to the

leaves. She couldn't blame Cousin Eleanor. She, herself, had sadly neglected the garden. She delighted in the flowers, but it was impossible to take care of them adequately. No matter how hard she worked, there was always more than one person could do.

"The animals had a fair.

The birds and the beasts were there—"

The tea-roses were perfect, melting shades of peaches and cream. Snip! Snip! went the scissors. Lee dropped a damp tangle of buds and leaves on the flowers in the basket. She saw the tea-roses in the green bowl Cousin Eleanor brought from abroad. They would be nice on the dining-room table with ivory candles and the lace cloth as fragile as cobwebs and frost.

When the candles were lighted this evening, Rickey would be at home. Ouch! That was a thorn!

And now she must return to the house. Lee pushed damp ringlets back from her brow and picked up the basket of flowers. But first she must admire the pond lilies. How fragrant they were! She could never get past them without pausing for a moment.

The hemlock hedge cast a pleasant shade. Lee sat on the curbing around the pool. The slow drip, drip of the fountain scarcely disturbed the

still greenish water. The pool was like a mirror. Between flat green leaves, between pink and cream-white blossoms with golden hearts, she saw her reflection.

Pretty? Well, yes, she was. It was only telling the truth to admit that obvious fact. Lee gazed dreamily at the face mirrored in the pool. Was it the dusting of freckles across her nose that gave her a childish look? Or was it the way her lashes curled? Something did. People never believed that she was as old as twenty. Of course she wasn't tall. Five feet and one inch in slippers with very high heels.

She wished she were distinguished looking, not just childish and pretty. It would be nice, she thought, to have smooth black hair and long dark eyes and a skin like gardenia petals. Her own complexion was nice enough, though her face was as red as a poppy, now, from being in the sun. But she looked so young. Lee sighed despairingly. No one would take her singing seriously if she couldn't manage to look older.

"The monkey, he got drunk—"

She would wear her new dress tonight, the dress she had bought in a reckless moment last spring. It was dreadfully expensive. She shouldn't have bought it, of course. The money Mother's Aunt Lucy left her was rapidly melting away. Where

had it gone? Music lessons, clothes, occasional trips. And she loved giving presents. She would have to curb her impulsive generosity. There was not much more than enough of the money left to pay for a year in New York.

She would have Grandmother Bell's legacy when she was twenty-one. She didn't know how much it would be—enough, she thought, to pay for further lessons with Madame Lucia, to share living expenses with Judy. Strange to think that next year she would be living with Judy, strange and a little frightening. What if she couldn't really sing?

The new dress was pretty, blue to match her eyes. She hadn't been able to resist the soft, floaty chiffon. She had thought, when she bought it, that Rickey might invite her to a spring dance at Harvard. Rickey hadn't. Well, she would wear it tonight. There was a dance at the Country Club. Perhaps, if Rickey wasn't too tired—

"Good morning."

Lee glanced up from the pool, surprised to hear a voice. John Walton, tall and sunburned, was walking toward her down the garden steps.

John! That was what she should have remembered. She had promised to ride with him this morning and, later, have breakfast with the Waltons. She had promised John over the telephone last evening just before Rickey's message came.

Lee felt her cheeks grow warm. How dreadful

of her to have forgotten John!

"Jake told me you were here." John seated himself beside Lee, stretched out his legs encased in riding-breeches and boots. "Are you going to ride in a smock? Not that it isn't becoming," he added, smiling down at her.

"Oh, John," she said, "I forgot!" Lee felt her cheeks grow warmer. She hadn't meant to tell him. But there!—the truth was out.

"That's flattering," John said lazily. "Be careful, you'll turn my head."

"I'm sorry." Lee looked up and smiled, looked down at her grubby hands. She *was* sorry. She liked John Walton, with his slow smile, and vigorous outdoor look. She was glad that he had been at home this summer after two years of study abroad. John was an architect. Everyone said he had great ability and predicted his future success. She hadn't known him well before, although he had lived all his life at Farmfields, his grandfather Walton's estate which had joined Robin Hill before the Dowlings' house was built. But John was older. His brothers, Blakely and Ned, were nearer her age. She hadn't really known John until this summer. . . .

"How sorry?" John asked, thinking how pretty she was in her flowered smock. "Pretty" seemed inadequate. She had been, he remembered, a pretty child. She was lovely now. Her brown hair, damply curling, had glints of bronze in the deep,

soft waves. Her eyes were the color of the small grape-hyacinths that grew in the spring at Farm-fields, dark blue, with long, curled lashes as dark as her slender brows. Little Shirley Penfield. . . .

"I can't begin to tell you—" Lee glanced up again, saw that he was smiling. John always smiled at her, she thought, even at things she meant seriously. But she didn't mind. He never smiled in the wrong places. It was fun to talk to John. He wasn't handsome—not when you thought of Rickey. But he was nice looking, tall and lean and tanned. She liked his rumpled dark hair, his smiling dark eyes.

"Well, now that you have remembered—" A curl had slipped from the loosely pinned knot at the nape of her neck. It lay, soft as a twist of silk against her delicate skin. He wanted to touch it but didn't dare. She had a charming, shy dignity. She would probably be offended. . . .

"I can't ride this morning, John."

"Why not?" he asked, watching the shadow her lashes made against her flushing cheek.

"Too busy," Lee said.

"Wash saddled Dixie for you."

"Oh, dear!" she sighed regretfully. "I love to ride Dixie."

"There'll be waffles with honey for breakfast."

"I love waffles with honey, too. But I can't ride this morning. I have to do the silver, and drive in town to market, and pick raspberries for Susie,

and I'm afraid that I recklessly promised Jake to help him mow the lawn."

"What a sudden burst of energy." John lit a cigarette. "You've been deceiving me all summer. I thought you were lazy."

"I am," Lee confessed. "I hate being energetic. But Rickey is coming home." She tried to make the words sound casual. They didn't. She could hear the singing notes in her voice.

"When?" John asked.

"Today. They're driving. Rickey is bringing a guest."

"They won't be here before noon, I suppose."

"No," Lee answered. "The telegram came from Boston."

"Then why can't you ride with me?" It was absurd to feel resentful, John thought. But he had to admit that he did.

"I've told you," she answered. "I have so many things to do. Rickey is coming home." Why must she keep repeating that, keep making a song of the words? . . .

"Sir Faithful," John said.

"Do you remember?" Her eyes opened wide in surprise.

"Of course."

"Why?" she asked. "It happened so long ago. I was seven and Rickey was ten. You were—"

"Fourteen or so. A man of the world."

"Why have you remembered, John?"

"You were so small and so frightened," John answered, smiling down at her through the smoke of his cigarette. "And you tried so hard to be brave. Besides," he added, "it was my first experience at rescuing a lady in distress."

"I *was* frightened," Lee said. "There were mice in the loft of the barn. I could see them when the lightning flashed. And the thunder boomed so loud."

"Why didn't you run back to the house? I think I asked you that at the time."

"Wasn't I a goose?" Lee smiled, a dreamy remembering smile. "I was to watch for the enemy. Rickey and Ned were playing knights. I was proud because they let me play, too. Games always seemed so real. I guess that's why I stayed."

"You must have been there for hours."

"I was. Rickey and Ned forgot me. You found me, John."

"I was looking for Ned."

"You were present at the knighting. Do you remember?"

"Very well."

"So do I." Lee laughed softly. "I was so excited I almost burst. Do you remember Rickey's armor and Cousin Eleanor's plume in his hat?"

"Rickey was magnificent."

"I thought so, too." Lee's warm color deepened. "And the things I promised—to do Rickey's

bidding, to obey his every behest. He was proud of the word 'behest.' He got it from *Ivanhoe*, I think, or maybe the *Idylls of the King*."

"The advantage seemed all on Rickey's side." Strange that he should have remembered, John thought, that the scene on the lawn at Robin Hill should have remained in his mind. Rickey seated on his pony, a handsome boy. Lee, at seven, a pretty child with deep, soft bangs. Strange—but he did remember.

"Oh, no." Lee laughed again. "The advantage wasn't all Rickey's. I had never been permitted to be a knight before. Sir Faithful," she repeated. "Rickey bumped me hard with his lance. There was a lump on my head. I'm afraid he took advantage of my promises," she continued. "He thought up so many 'behests.'"

They were silent for a moment. The fountain made gentle splashing sounds dripping into the pool. She had served him faithfully, cheerfully, too. Rickey was so magnificent. She had been proud to be included in his games. Sir Faithful. . . .

John wondered what she was thinking. She seemed to have forgotten him. What was Rickey like now? "Spoiled," Grandfather Walton had said; "but charming," Mother had added. Lee and Rickey were cousins—second or third. They had grown up together. Was Lee in love with Rickey? It surprised him to realize that he didn't

like the idea. . . .

Jake appeared at the top of the garden steps. "Breakfast, Miss Lee," he called.

Lee rose quickly, picked up the basket of flowers. "I must hurry," she said. "I shouldn't have wasted all this time."

"Wasted?" John also rose.

"I didn't mean—" she smiled up at him. Her hand touched his arm. "I'm sorry I broke my promise. Some other morning— Give my love to Dixie."

She left him, hurrying, ran lightly up the garden steps. John followed more slowly. On the top step lay a rose which had fallen from her basket. He stooped to pick it up, meaning to call her back, to keep her a moment longer. But when he had pushed his way through the tangle of vines, he saw that she had disappeared.

With the rose in his hand, he walked down across the lawn alone.

Chapter Three: ELEANOR READS HER MAIL

THALIA, Susie's granddaughter, clumped upstairs with the mail. Eleanor looked up from her desk when the girl opened the door.

"Thalia!" she said reproachfully. "How many times have I told you to knock when a door is closed."

"Ah forgot, Miss Eleanor." Thalia's chocolate-

brown face looked sulky. She mumbled under her breath.

Eleanor sighed. She couldn't be sure that Thalia was being impudent, but then, she couldn't be sure that she wasn't. It seemed wiser not to inquire.

"Well," she said, taking the mail, "please try to remember next time."

"Yessum," Thalia promised and clumped off downstairs.

The girl was impossible, Eleanor thought, hearing the dragging sound of Thalia's feet on the stairs. She should have spoken to her more firmly. But she felt so helpless when Thalia thrust out her lower lip. She couldn't risk upsetting her today, with Rickey coming and bringing a guest. She was bad enough at the best of times, so touchy and clumsy and slow. But they couldn't afford anyone more efficient. They couldn't afford Thalia, really. Eleanor sighed again.

Most of the mail was bills. Eleanor read the names on the envelopes. *Brown and McWilliams, Roofers*. She tried to be careful, but gracious! she had to have the roof repaired. They couldn't be expected to sleep under umbrellas. *The West Grove Market*. Mr. Porter was getting unpleasant. He had embarrassed her by calling on the telephone when Alicia Carey was there. It was presuming of Mr. Porter, she thought, considering the number of years he had supplied Robin

Hill with groceries and provisions.

Henry Weeks, Decorator. What was that? A pucker creased Eleanor's brow. Oh, yes, he was the nice young man who did over her room last spring. She had intended just to have draperies for the windows. But the crisp new chintz made everything else look dingy. And he *had* given her a special price on the wallpaper and rugs.

Lucille, Inc. What pretty stationery they used, pale gray with the name flourished on in violet letters. That was the bill for her cream lace dress. What if it had been the least bit expensive? She hadn't had a really good dress for years. It had been exciting to go into Lucille's again and have Miss Rose come to welcome her and the girls scurrying about to bring her things to try on. Just like old times, Miss Rose had said. She had bought all her clothes at Lucille's before Richard died.

Thinking of Richard, she convinced herself that it would hurt him to know that she was deprived of anything that might make her happy. He had loved her so. Mamma used to say that she had never seen a man so head-over-heels in love with a girl as Richard had been with her.

All the girls in West Grove had been in love with Richard. She had been so proud because he had seemed to like her best, because she and Mamma were poor and their house was small and they had to inch and pinch dreadfully to live in a

genteel fashion. But she was pretty, the prettiest girl in town. Richard often told her that.

Oh, how she had loved Robin Hill when Richard brought her there as a bride—the servants who spoke to her so respectfully, the good food old Lina cooked, her pretty room with its taffeta curtains and soft rose-patterned carpet. And how she had loved her pretty clothes after turning and twisting and making things over for so long. And she *had* loved Richard, she thought, she had loved him very much.

Eleanor mopped at her eyes with a wisp of lace-trimmed linen. Her attention returned to the mail. There was a letter from the bank. She opened it gingerly, as though it might explode. Her account, the letter informed her, was overdrawn again. It couldn't be. She had been so very careful. The bank had made a mistake.

She reached for her checkbook. With a silver pencil she jotted down rows of figures on the back of the envelope from the bank. There were notations on the stubs of the checks she had drawn. *Rickey—\$200.00. \$75.30—Repairs on Rickey's car. Self—\$50.00—Hairdresser, Florist, Rickey's Birthday. \$30.00—Borrowed from Lee. Must pay back rest.*

She added the row of figures and felt a glow of triumph. There! the bank had made a mistake! She would call Mr. Owen and tell him. Her hand reached for the telephone. But she couldn't

have that much balance. The pucker creased her brow. She added the figures again. The result, this time, left a larger balance than before. She closed the checkbook. Oh, dear! Her head was beginning to ache.

Dividends were due the first of the month. Why were they smaller each time? She couldn't understand what had happened to the money.

There would be Rickey's bills for next year. It cost a great deal to go to Harvard—more now than when Richard was there. Perhaps Rickey needn't take his car back to Cambridge. That would be a saving. But he had to have relaxation. He wasn't strong, though he looked so well. She liked to think of him riding in the country after long hours of study. No—Rickey must have his car.

Something would have to be done. She would have a talk with Judge Walton. It wouldn't be pleasant. The Judge always seemed to blame her for the state of affairs, as though she didn't do her best, putting up with inefficient servants and wearing her clothes long after they should have been given to Susie. People grew contrary with age. There was Aunt Harriet—

Well, she couldn't waste any more time. There were dozens of things she must do. Eleanor thrust the bills into a drawer of the desk. There was the name of a hotel on one of the envelopes. It was post-marked "Chicago." She recognized the

writing.

Blushing, she slit the envelope and drew out the single sheet it contained. As she read, her blushes deepened until her throat was pink. James Connell was coming east again. He expected to arrive in Philadelphia a week from today. He hoped to have the pleasure of calling at Robin Hill.

Eleanor felt breathless and excited. She thought James Connell meant to ask her to marry him. *Mrs. James Connell* wrote the silver pencil under the row of figures on the envelope from the bank.

If he should ask her to marry him, what would her answer be? The silver pencil traced tremulous lines. Mr. Connell was wealthy, not merely rich or well-to-do. He could do so much for her. He could do so much for Rickey. He had all sorts of business contacts. It would be a simple matter for him to find a place in an important law firm for Rickey as soon as he finished at Harvard. Getting a start was so difficult. For Rickey's sake—

She remembered the night last winter that she had met Mr. Connell at a dinner at the Dowlings'. What a huge man he was! At first she had thought he was ugly. His features looked as though they had been hacked out of stone and his eyebrows were dreadfully shaggy. But it was a fascinating sort of ugliness. He looked so

strong. His voice was very pleasant.

He wasn't a gentleman, of course. He had been a poor boy, not poor as she and Mamma had been, but so poor that sometimes he hadn't had enough to eat. She had been thrilled, too, when he told her the story of his life. It was like the stories of successful men in magazines. It made him seem romantic and wonderful although he wasn't a gentleman.

He had come to Philadelphia on business twice since the night she had met him. Each time he had called at Robin Hill. It had been exciting to drive into the city in his car with a uniformed chauffeur, to have dinner at the Bellevue where the head waiter called Mr. Connell by name and came, himself, to settle her in her chair. She had loved having the best seats at the theater and a spray of orchids to pin on the collar of her coat. Oh, dear! What answer would she give him if he asked her to marry him?

She was sure that he would—sometime. He had told her that he wanted to retire from active business and live in the country. He admired Robin Hill. And he seemed to think she was wonderful. He treated her as though she were made of porcelain and spun glass.

A pleased, dreamy smile curved Eleanor's lips. *Eleanor Connell* wrote the pencil in letters scalloped by agitation. What would Richard wish her to do? He wanted her to be happy. It would

make her happy to have Robin Hill lovely again, to have well-trained servants and pretty clothes, to travel, to be sure of a right start for Rickey. Darling Rickey! That mattered most of all.

She was pretty, still, in spite of all the trouble she'd had. Flushing, she looked up into the mirror above the desk. A little plump, perhaps. Sometimes she thought of dieting. Alicia Carey was beautifully slim, but there were lines in her face. Her own face was smooth and young-looking except when she was tired. It wasn't healthy to diet. Doctors were always writing articles for the paper exposing the evils of diet. Mr. Connell said—

In the mirror, Eleanor saw the door open, saw Aunt Harriet enter the room. Her rosy blushes increased. She frowned and fumbled with her hair.

Primping! Aunt Harriet thought and tightened her lips. Aloud she said, "Yes, you look well enough. You're a pretty woman, my dear."

Eleanor gave a fictitious start.

"Oh, dear!" she said, trying to sound depressed. "I've discovered one gray hair." She jerked out a curling brown strand with a violent gesture.

"You don't sound distressed about it." Aunt Harriet's bright blue eyes observed her closely. "You look like the cat that swallowed the canary. There are feathers all over your chin. Well, I'm ready," she added, drawing on black silk gloves.

"Where are you going?" Eleanor asked. In her confusion she hadn't really noticed that Aunt Harriet wore her hat and carried a coat on her arm.

"I shouldn't think you would need to ask. I've had luncheon with Fanny Price every Thursday for fifteen years, at least."

"I forgot it was Thursday." Eleanor looked annoyed. "Jake is mowing the lawn and Lee is doing the silver. I don't like to ask either of them to drive you out to Fernwood. Couldn't you—"

"I don't see why the house should be turned upside down because Rickey is coming home." Aunt Harriet snapped on her glove clasps. "You spoil him, Eleanor. Not that you've asked for my opinion," she added.

Eleanor smothered a sigh. Aunt Harriet might have a little consideration today, she thought, with everyone so busy. Lunching with Fanny Price certainly wasn't a matter of life or death. She wished Aunt Harriet would go to live with her dear Fanny Price. Not that there was a chance. She had lived at Robin Hill ever since Uncle Henry died. She would, she often stated, live there until the end. She was Father Penfield's sister, but really—

"I don't see," she began doubtfully.

Aunt Harriet drew her mouth into a tight line.

"I can ask Fanny to send for me," she said.

Eleanor knew what that would mean. Aunt Harriet would never stop talking about how badly she was treated, not pointedly, but in a way to make people sorry for her. It wasn't fair. She did try to be nice to Aunt Harriet. Alicia Carey often said she had never seen greater patience.

"Oh, no," she said, sighing. "I'll ask Jake to take you, of course."

Rising from the desk, her hand touched James Connell's letter. Gracious! Did her cheeks look as hot as they felt? Thinking of Mr. Connell and the things that might happen, her resentment melted away.

"Take some raspberries to Miss Fanny," she suggested. "Lee picked quantities of them—more than Susie can use. Ours are always nicer than the ones at Fernwood even if we haven't a gardener and three assistants."

Aunt Harriet merely sniffed. But Eleanor didn't mind. It consoled her to know that she was being generous to Aunt Harriet.

They walked along the hall, Eleanor ahead, Aunt Harriet following, walking heavily because of her weight. At the door of Rickey's room Eleanor paused. It looked bright and comfortable, she thought, peeping in. Lee must have put the flowers on the desk, the new magazines on the table beside the easy chair.

The room wouldn't be neat very long. It would look as though a tidal wave had swept over it an hour after Rickey arrived. Darling Rickey! It would be lovely to have his room untidy again, to know that he was there.

Thinking of Rickey, Eleanor forgot Aunt Harriet and the bills, forgot James Connell's letter. Her hand touched the door caressingly.

"Hump!" said Aunt Harriet, and tightened her lips above her three pink chins.

Chapter Four: RICKEY BRINGS A GUEST

AT FIRST the day stretched out unbearably long, and then, before Lee realized how fast the hours were slipping away, there was scarcely any of it left and she had to hurry about setting the table under the linden tree. And just as she finished arranging the peasant china on the coarse cloth of yellow linen, a storm came up and everything had to be rushed back into the house.

Setting the table in the dining-room consumed a great deal of time. Feeling warm and tired and in need of a bath, Lee took the silver from its casings of feather-stitched flannel. The lace cloth needed mending. That was one of the reasons why they had decided to have supper out of doors. There was no time for mending now. Cousin Eleanor was taking a nap and Thalia, clumping around with her lower lip thrust out like a cam-

el's, was almost worse than no help at all.

Providentially, the bowl of roses covered the broken threads in the cloth. How lovely their peach tints were against the sea-green glass! In spite of having to hurry, Lee bent over them, breathing their refreshing fragrance.

The best china had to be washed. Gracious, she looked a sight, Lee thought, catching a glimpse of her face in the sideboard mirror above a tilting pile of plates. Her hair was dusty. There were streaks of dirt on her warm, flushed cheeks. Girls in books sounded enchanting when they were grubby and tousled. She certainly wasn't enchanting. What if Rickey or Rickey's guest should see her looking this way? The thought sent her scurrying to the kitchen, where Susie was mixing biscuit dough and Thalia, up to her elbows in suds, was languidly washing cups.

At last, everything was ready. Lee surveyed the results of her labor with pride. The dining-room was charming with its ivory-paneled walls, its mahogany rubbed to the dark shining of ox-heart cherries, its rug patterned in soft shades of rose and amber and blue. The rain was falling steadily. She drew the curtains across the windows. There! The room was perfect.

And now for a bath.

But first she must inspect Thalia. There was no telling how she might ornament herself if the choice were left to her. Once she had appeared

in the dining-room wearing long glass ear-rings. There had been company for dinner. Cousin Eleanor had been wild.

Thalia wore no ornaments tonight. She looked neat enough in her black uniform but oh, so solid and bunchy! Adjusting the frill over Thalia's brow, re-tying her apron strings into a perky bow, she thought of Maida, always so trim and quiet and deft. Maida worked for the Dowlings now.

She lingered for final instructions.

"Never bring in more than one plate at a time."

"Yessum."

"And don't say 'Yessum' to Miss Eleanor when you answer the bell."

"No'um."

"Always serve at the left. Which is your left hand, Thalia?"

Thalia demonstrated.

"That's it." Lee sighed with weariness and relief. "Serve at the left," she repeated. "How can I make you remember? Serve left—Sally Lunn." Her brow cleared. "Keep saying 'Sally Lunn' to yourself."

Thalia looked bewildered.

"Serve Left-Sally Lunn," Lee repeated patiently. "Don't you see, Thalia? The first letters are the same."

Thalia's face brightened a little.

"Yessum, Miss Lee," she said.

"And Thalia—"

There were no more instructions for Thalia. Through the rain Lee heard the sound of a car speeding along the drive. It was Rickey! She knew the sound of the car, the sudden grinding of brakes. She fled through the kitchen, up the back-stairs, along the hall to her room. Alone in the dining-room, Thalia sampled a bon-bon from the silver dish on the sideboard and, with her mouth very full, solemnly chanted "Sally Lunn."

"The animals had a fair.

The birds and the beasts were there—"

Lee sang, plunging in and out of a shower, brushing the dust from her hair. She didn't feel tired now. She felt like a pinwheel whirling sparks, like a rocket about to explode. In a pale silk dressing gown she crept to the door and opened it a crack. She heard voices in the downstairs hall. Cousin Eleanor's, Rickey's. She heard Rickey laugh. Hadn't he brought a guest?

The blue dress hung in her wardrobe, a swaying cloud of chiffon. She hadn't time to put it on, to fasten the tiny loops. She couldn't wait to see Rickey. Hurrying, she slipped into a frock of violet linen, frowning with impatience when a button caught in her hair.

But when the buttons were fastened and her hair was brushed smooth again, she invented ex-

cuses for lingering in the room. She powdered her nose and reddened her lips and rubbed the red off again. She knew she was acting silly, but her heart was beating so queerly, thumping against her ribs. She opened the door and stepped out into the hall.

Cousin Eleanor was leading the way upstairs. Her cheeks were as pink as her rose-colored dress. She was talking brightly but she looked, somehow, as though she were annoyed. There was Rickey, tanned a deep brown, his blond hair wet with rain. Between them walked a girl. Lee felt a sinking sensation—like swooping down in a swing. She had never imagined that Rickey's guest would be a girl, and a girl they had never seen!

"Hello," Rickey called casually, as though it hadn't been six weeks since he had seen her.

"Hello," Lee answered, feeling her cheeks grow warm.

"This is my cousin, Shirley Penfield," Rickey set down the luggage in the upper hall. "We call her Lee. She isn't big enough for a name two syllables long. Lee, this is Elaine Archer."

"How do you do," said the girl in a low, cool voice.

"How do you do," said Lee. Words tripped lightly through her mind—"Elaine, the fair; Elaine, the lovable"—the quotation was not appropriate. This Elaine was dark. She had silky

black hair and tilted dark eyes and her lips were very red. She was taller than Lee and exquisitely slim. Her dark eyes, her dark, honey-colored skin gave her a foreign look. She was beautifully dressed. Lee glanced down at her own linen frock. She wished she had taken time to put on the blue chiffon.

"I'm afraid this is an imposition, Mrs. Penfield," Elaine drew off soft suede gloves. "I told Rickey—"

"Elaine wanted me to send detailed information," Rickey interrupted. "Name, age, sex, color of eyes and hair. I told her you wouldn't mind. You don't mind, do you, Mother?"

"Of course not, dear." Eleanor smiled but Lee thought she still looked as though she wanted to cry. "Your friends are always welcome."

"Didn't I tell you she was pretty?" Rickey's arm circled Eleanor's waist. Her hand lay against his sleeve.

"Yes," Elaine agreed.

"Nonsense, Rickey." Eleanor beamed. She was happy again because Rickey had said she was pretty. "He's a great tease, Miss Archer."

"Must you be formal?" Rickey inquired. "Can't you call her Elaine?"

"It's a pretty name." Eleanor became a gracious hostess. "You must be hungry, driving so far. Dinner is just about ready." She moved along the hall. Elaine followed. Rickey re-

assembled the luggage.

Lee stood quietly, her hand on the banister rail. "This is your room," she heard Cousin Eleanor say. "It's charming," murmured Elaine. "What a beautiful bed! Do you mind if I admire things?"

Voices mingled in the guest room. Rickey laughed. A window was raised. "That one always sticks," Eleanor apologized. "The bed belonged to Rickey's great-grandmother," Lee heard her say. "She was—" Rickey came out into the hall.

"Mother is off on the family history," Rickey switched on a light. "How are you, Lee?" He stooped and kissed her, a casual kiss, just touching the side of her cheek.

"Fine," she answered, a catch in her voice. She glanced up at Rickey. "You're so brown, Rickey. You look so well."

"Swimming," he said, smiling down at her. "What have you been doing?"

"Oh, nothing much," Lee said. *Nothing much?* Nothing at all, really, but waiting. Watching the days pass in a kind of dream of anticipation. Waiting and thinking of Rickey coming home, of how he would look, what he would say, planning the gay things they would do together. *Nothing much?* Wondering if he would be glad to see her again. All those days of waiting, a drowsy interlude, to be lived

through before Rickey came home. Not unhappy days, because she had him to think about, because each dawn and dark moved the summer one day closer. And now—the whole six long weeks of promise suddenly empty, the long hours robbed of fulfillment. She put her hands to her throat. She mustn't let Rickey see. She must smile, say something, anything. "I've practiced," she said, "and Judy was here."

"How's Judy?"

"Very well."

"As peppery as ever?"

"You don't appreciate Judy."

"It's mutual." Rickey laughed. "Judy does not appreciate me."

Eleanor closed the guest room door. "Hurry, darling," she said. "Dinner is waiting." Her hand touched Rickey's sleeve. "Your coat is damp. Are you sure you aren't catching cold?"

"I look delicate, don't I?" Rickey said.

"But your throat isn't strong. I worried so while you were away. The water in Maine is so cold." She hid her face against his shoulder.

"Oh, Rickey darling, I'm so glad you're home."

"So glad that you're crying. Oh, yes, you are." Rickey kissed the tip of her ear. "Isn't Elaine lovely?" he asked in a lower voice.

"But who is she, dear?"

"She went to school with Kay Marshall, Bob's sister, you know. She visited the Marshalls while

"I was there. She lives in New York. I stayed at her home last night."

"What kind of people are they?" Eleanor asked, looking anxious.

"Swell."

"Swell! But Rickey—"

"Good Lord! I didn't inquire into their ancestors." Rickey looked annoyed. "She'll know we're talking about her, whispering like this. Go down and hurry up dinner, Mother. I'm as hungry as a wolf."

Eleanor sighed, smiled faintly, and went downstairs. Lee started to follow. Rickey called her.

"Be a good girl and help me unpack."

"You're so helpless, Rickey," Lee followed Rickey into his room.

"You always say that." Rickey flung his suitcase on the bed, switched on all of the lights.

"You like me anyway, though, don't you, Lee?"

"I think you're very conceited." Lee's fingers fumbled with buckles and straps. He was charming, she thought, so gay, so alive. He made other men seem solid and dull, even John who was so nice. How long would Elaine stay? she wondered. The summer would soon be over and Rickey returning to Cambridge.

"Is there a dance at the club tonight?" Rickey pulled out bureau drawers in a frantic search for something.

"Yes."

"That's fine." Whistling a dance tune, Rickey caught her around the waist and whirled her across the room.

It was lovely to dance with Rickey again. His body was thin and strong. He moved with an easy grace. Lee felt as though she were floating. She never wanted to stop. But Rickey wasn't thinking of her.

"Elaine is a beautiful dancer," he said. "Gosh, she'll knock their eyes out!"

Lee pulled away and returned to the suitcase.

"What a way to pack!" she said as she threw back the lid. "Everything jumbled together."

But she couldn't see the jumble clearly. Her lashes were misted with tears.

Chapter Five: A GUEST IS DISCUSSED

LEE, AT THE PIANO in the music room, sounded soft, aimless chords. Rickey and Elaine had gone to the Country Club dance. They had asked her to go with them but she thought they had looked relieved when she said she would rather stay home.

A shaded lamp made a golden dusk in the room. Through it Eleanor moved restlessly, standing a moment at the window, touching the flowers in the bowl on the table, turning the music on the shelf of the piano.

"Susie's dinner was nice," she said absently.

"Yes," Lee agreed through rippling chords.

"And Thalia served very well. But what was she mumbling? It sounded like Sally Lunn."

"It was." Lee smiled faintly. "That was to make her remember to serve at the left. But I didn't expect her to set it to music and sing it all through dinner."

A frown puckered Eleanor's brow. "Rickey hadn't much appetite. He hardly touched his dessert."

"He was too busy looking at that girl." Aunt Harriet billowed into the room. "Did I leave my knitting in here?"

"I don't think he was." Eleanor ignored Aunt Harriet's question. "I don't think he looked at her more than was merely polite."

"Oh, don't you?" Aunt Harriet poked among the cushions on the love-seat. "Well, none so blind as those who will not see."

"Do you think—" Eleanor's voice faltered. Her cheeks were very pink. "Do you think she is in love with Rickey?"

"That's one way of putting it. I'm sure Rickey thinks he's in love with her." Breathing heavily, Aunt Harriet moved a screen. "I thought I left my knitting here. Don't you remember, this morning, Lee, before I went to Fanny's?"

"Excuse me, Aunt Harriet. I didn't hear—"

"Oh, never mind." Aunt Harriet sank down on the love-seat. Springs creaked and groaned.

"My, isn't it hot? I thought it would be cooler after the storm. It seems odd to me," she continued, unfurling a spangled silk fan, "that her mother would let her come to visit without knowing us at all."

"All of Rickey's friends do that." Eleanor pulled out a spike of larkspur and pushed it back among the phlox in the bowl. "Rickey knows that I want him to bring his friends here."

"And anything Rickey does is right."

"Really, Aunt Harriet—"

"It wasn't done when I was a girl." Aunt Harriet drew in her chins. "Is she an American?"

"Gracious!" Eleanor looked startled. "Of course she is. Why?"

"She's so dark. I thought she might be Italian or something. Or is it this sun-tan powder they're advertising now."

"She's lovely looking," Lee said slowly. "She looks like a painting. Do you remember the one we saw in New York, Cousin Eleanor, 'The Girl with the Scarlet Slippers?'" She pictured Elaine in the floaty white dress she had worn to the dance. She and Rickey were beautiful together. They were dancing now. Elaine in her scarlet slippers was dancing, now, with Rickey.

"All that red on her mouth!" Aunt Harriet grimaced. "Can she possibly think it looks natural? I don't object to make-up. But there are limits. Her lips came off on the napkin."

"It's striking with her dark skin. She seems to have been very well brought up. But—"

"How long is she going to stay?"

"I haven't asked her."

"Well, I suppose we're in for it." Aunt Harriet sighed. "There's nothing so tiresome as living with people who think they are in love. They're always mooning around and forgetting meals and looking annoyed if you dare to ask them a question. I don't suppose anyone else will be allowed to sit in the arbor now. Gracious!" she broke off suddenly. "That's where I left my knitting. I remember noticing that the wool was the color of the honeysuckle. It's probably soaked."

"Shall I get it, Aunt Harriet?" Lee asked.

"Oh, no. No use to bother now." Aunt Harriet glanced at the clock and, grasping the arm of the love-seat, pulled herself up slowly. "You two aren't very amusing. I think I'll go to bed."

"Are there melons for breakfast?" Eleanor asked when the stairs had ceased to creak under Aunt Harriet's weight. "I ought to go out and see." She walked to the door, paused, turned to ask a question.

"Lee," she asked, "do you think Rickey is in love with Elaine?"

"I don't know." Lee's head bent over the keys. Dark lashes shadowed her eyes.

"There's no doubt that she's in love with him."

Eleanor moved nearer the piano. "Why shouldn't she be?"

Lee remained silent. She sat looking down at the ivory keys, slender and young in her violet dress with the lamplight on her hair.

"I want Rickey to marry." Eleanor fumbled for her handkerchief. "I'm not one of those selfish mothers who want to keep their sons for themselves. But Rickey is so attractive. I'm afraid some girl will make him think he's in love with her. Then he'll marry her and regret it the rest of his life."

"Rickey isn't thinking of marriage," Lee said, wanting to comfort Cousin Eleanor. "He hasn't finished law school. He's thinking of dancing now."

"Of course he is." Eleanor smiled through tears. "I don't know why I'm crying except that I'm tired and Aunt Harriet is provoking." Looking happier, she walked again to the door. "What was it I was going to do?"

"See about melons for breakfast."

"Oh, yes. And then I think I'll go upstairs. Good night, Lee."

Chapter Six: A LARK IN HER THROAT

AFTER ELEANOR had gone, Lee sat alone in the golden dusk. Her fingers, moving across the keys of the piano, picked out an accompaniment for

the song she had been humming all day—

"The animals had a fair.

The birds and the beasts were there—"

She had wanted to sing it for Rickey tonight, to ask him if he remembered. But Rickey was dancing with Elaine. He had looked relieved when Lee said she would rather stay at home. She had been so happy this morning. It seemed very long ago.

The tune rippled across the keys. She and Rickey had loved it when they were children. She saw the school room: the crimson curtains, the lumpy old sofa that curved at each end, the firelight playing over pictures of children with rabbits and dogs and the wallpaper in between. She saw Cousin Eleanor at the piano, singing in her gentle voice, her cheeks flushed a pretty pink; Rickey shouting lustily, his face above his Eton collar bright red from exertion; Grandfather Penfield in the armchair, buzzing like a giant bee, keeping time to the music with the toe of a carefully polished boot.

She had been too shy to sing with the others when she first came to Robin Hill. And then, one evening, she had. She remembered how they had all stopped singing to listen and Grandfather had said to Cousin Eleanor, "Nelly, that child has a voice."

How proud and how happy she had been. Lee remembered the blissful feeling of that moment when Cousin Eleanor had kissed her and hugged her tight and Grandfather, looking as pleased as Punch, had reached into his pocket to give her a dime.

Wings had stirred in her heart. She had looked at Rickey, shyly from under her lashes, wanting him, more than the others, to be pleased because she could sing. But Rickey hadn't looked pleased. He had made a funny sound in his throat and bolted out of the room.

The wings in her heart had been stilled. She hadn't been able to wink back tears or keep her lips from trembling. "Nose out of joint," Grandfather had said when Rickey slammed the door. "Let him alone, Nelly. Let him sulk if he wants to. He's got to learn, sometime, that he isn't the only trout in the brook." But Cousin Eleanor had followed Rickey, hurrying, forgetting that Lee could sing.

Then Grandfather had held her close to him on the sofa and dried her eyes on his handkerchief and opened his watch with the humming-birds carved on the heavy gold case to show her a picture of Grandmother Penfield whose name had been Shirley, too—only she was Great-aunt Shirley, of course, and Grandfather, rightly, was Great-uncle Richard, but she called them the names that Rickey did because it had made her

seem to belong to them more.

Grandfather had told her that Grandmother, too, could sing. He told her how she had loved the birds, especially the robins, and how, in the spring, she coaxed them to build their nests in the trees around the house. And so many robins came to live in the oaks and the elms and the maples that they named the place Robin Hill.

"And now we have another Shirley," Grandfather had said, "a Shirley who can sing. God put a lark in your throat," he said. "It's a wonderful gift, my dear."

A lark in her throat! The pain of Rickey's rudeness had disappeared. God had put a lark in her throat! Grandfather had given her something, too,—the gift of a beautiful thought.

Dear Grandfather! The gay little song was hushed. She had thought of him when she sang for Madame Lucia last winter in New York. She had been frightened, just at first, until she thought of Grandfather. Then the studio with its velvet curtains and soft, thick rugs had melted into the music room at home and, playing her own accompaniment, she sang one of the simple songs Grandfather had loved as she had sung it for him so often in the twilight just before dinner. And when she had finished, Madame Lucia had said, "It is a charming little voice. We shall see, my dear. We shall see."

The words had settled everything, though she

hadn't dared to believe it until the letter arrived. Madame Lucia would give her lessons. She was going to New York in the fall. The thought gave her that sinking sensation again, like swooping down in a swing. She would try. She would work so very hard.

And if she could really sing, if sometime she stood on a concert stage giving wings to the lark in her throat, she hoped Grandfather would know, somehow. And Grandmother whom she had never seen, whose name had been Shirley, too. Were there robins in Heaven? She thought there must be, small fat robins with halos. Grandfather's Shirley had loved them so much.

But she wouldn't be thinking only of Grandfather, as much as she had loved him, when she stood on a concert stage. She would be thinking of Rickey, too. Perhaps he would be proud of her, then. She wanted him to be proud. She had wanted it dreadfully when she was a shy little girl and Rickey was a handsome boy with a cock-of-the-walk swagger and very bright blond hair.

Rickey was part of all her thoughts. It was because she wanted him to be proud of her that she had been happy when she knew she was pretty, when she knew she could sing. Her thoughts flew to Rickey when people paid her compliments.

She loved Rickey. She had loved him since she was a child. She hadn't admitted it before—not

even to herself. She had been afraid Cousin Eleanor might suspect, Aunt Harriet, Rickey himself. She loved him so much that it was like a pain in her heart. But she didn't want anyone to know. Had John suspected this morning when she talked to him by the pool, when she couldn't, to save her, hush the singing notes in her voice?

The clock chimed. Lee rose from the piano bench, switched off the shaded light. Darkness blotted out the golden dusk in the room.

She stood at the window. The rain had stopped. High up over the elm tops, through shreds of ragged clouds, floated the moon. Last night she had watched it from the window-seat in her room, feeling happy and excited because Rickey was coming home. Why had she been so happy? Why had she thought that this time it would be different, that Rickey would really see her?

He never really saw her. She was a part of home, as familiar as the furniture. Strange things attracted Rickey, lovely, odd-looking girls like Elaine. If she could become mysterious—but she couldn't. She couldn't change herself. She would never be more to Rickey than a part of home, dear because she was familiar.

Lee's head dropped against the screen, straightened as she heard the sound of a car in the drive. Ricky was returning from the dance, Rickey and Elaine in her scarlet slippers with her dark, tilted

eyes. She didn't want to see them again tonight. She couldn't bear the way Rickey looked at Elaine.

Hurrying, she fled up the dark stairs and along the hall to her room.

Chapter Seven: MRS. DOWLING IS ROGUISH

"HAVE YOU had a nice time, Elaine?"

"Yes, Rickey. Indeed I have."

They sat, beneath gay striped awnings, on the club-house veranda. Elaine wore a white silk tennis frock and a scarlet ribbon bound her hair. Rickey's shirt was open at the throat. His hair was rumpled, and his flannel trousers had lost their immaculate creases. On a table between them stood tall glasses beaded with moisture.

"Do you mean it?" Rickey smiled at Elaine. "Aren't you just being polite?"

"I'm never very polite." Elaine returned his smile. "I've had a beautiful time."

"So have I. You do everything so well, swimming, riding. You play a swell game of tennis."

"I ought to." A smile curved Elaine's red lips. It did not touch her eyes. "I've been well trained for the serious business of life."

"Which is—?"

"Marrying well. I thought you knew."

"Oh, that—"

"You dismiss serious things so lightly. That's

because you are young."

"Young? I'm only a year younger than you are. What's a year between friends?"

"Don't look offended. Being young and taking things lightly make you very charming. I wish I could dismiss serious things so lightly." Her eyes darkened. "I can't. We're very poor."

"Poor—?"

"Oh, I know we put up a front. We live just off Fifth Avenue and use finger bowls at dinner. But we're as poor as church mice, really. Did you ever see a church mouse?"

"Silly! Darling! No."

"I merely wondered. Rickey, don't! You must not hold my hand in public. People are looking."

"I don't care." Rickey leaned toward her across the table. "Don't go tomorrow, Elaine."

"I must." Elaine gently withdrew her hand. "I—Rickey, I don't dare stay."

"Why not? Aren't we nice to you?"

"Too nice." Elaine moved her glass. The ice made a tinkling sound. "It's dangerous to stay. I might fall in love with you."

"Would that be a calamity?"

"A tragedy. For both of us. I'm an expensive creature. I hate to go back to New York. I hate having Mother fish for invitations. I'm being honest. I'm always honest on— What day is this?"

"Thursday. We came a week ago today."

"I'm always honest on Thursdays." Elaine lifted her lashes and looked across the table at Rickey. "I like you when your hair is mussed. You look like a little boy."

"Sweet! Don't go tomorrow."

"I've told you, Rickey, I don't dare stay. I might fall in love with you."

"You have."

"Conceited!" Elaine colored. "Well, a little, perhaps. That's why I must go. I've been loafing. I'm twenty-four. I should have captured a husband long ago."

"I don't mind your talking nonsense. I like to hear your voice."

"It isn't nonsense. Well, maybe it is." Elaine rested her elbows on the table, her chin in the palms of her hands. "Do you know it isn't kind of you to be so good-looking. It complicates things for me."

"You weren't kind to me in Maine, at first, after the evening you came and we went out in the canoe. Do you remember the stars in the lake? You pretended you were fishing."

"I remember."

"But after all that you were always running away. I almost gave up, I thought I had done something to you."

"You had. I was frightened."

"I could have murdered that Lucas man."

"He was my great opportunity. I shouldn't

"Have let him escape."

"He was fifty, at least."

"I know. You're sweet when you're scornful, Rickey. Why is it young men never have any money?"

"You mean—why haven't I?"

"That sounds terribly grasping, doesn't it?" Elaine colored again. "You ought to despise me. Please don't despise me, Rickey."

"I love you. Have I mentioned it? Well not on a club-house porch anyway. And what can I do about it?" Rickey frowned. "I have another year at law school. And then—do you think I will make a good lawyer, Elaine?"

"Splendid!" Her eyes were tender and amused. "Your office will be filled with palpitating ladies."

"I don't know—" Rickey said gloomily. "I never thought much about it—before I met you. Father was a lawyer. Grandfather, too. I always knew I was going to Harvard and to law school. Oh," he moved restlessly in his chair. "Don't let's talk about the future. Let's talk about now."

"We have tonight."

"Even that won't be perfect. Mother is having a guest for dinner. A Mr. Cornwell or Carroll or something."

"A beau?" Elaine asked.

"I don't know. She seemed in a flutter about it. But Mother is always fluttering. I love the way your hair grows. Lee thinks you look like a

Spanish painting."

"Does she?" Elaine smiled. "That's nice of her."

"You do." Rickey's eyes were tender. "You're so lovely, Elaine, so just exactly right."

"Darling!" she whispered softly.

A motor purred past them and stopped, with a murmur of brakes, at the entrance of the club. A chauffeur in bottle-green sprang down to open the door. Through it stepped a large man in gray flannels. A short, fat woman followed and a plump, pink and white girl.

"Who are they?" Elaine asked in an undertone. "The woman looks like a strawberry sundae. All that pink silk and white fox fur. Who is she, Rickey?"

Rickey had no time to answer. The woman moved toward them, teetering on high white kid heels. A jingling of bracelets came with her and puffs of strong perfume.

"Well, if this isn't a coincidence!" she exclaimed, bearing down upon Rickey and Elaine. "Haven't your ears been burning? We've been talking about you."

At the sound of her voice, people stopped talking to listen. Two ladies, seated near by, looked up from magazines.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Dowling." Rickey, flushing, rose from his chair. "Let me present Miss Archer."

"How do you do," Elaine murmured.

"Happy to know you, I'm sure." Mrs. Dowling turned from Elaine to Rickey. "You bad boy!" she said, playfully tapping his arm. "You've been home a week and you haven't been over to see us. Do you call that being neighborly? You remember Gertrude, don't you?" She drew the pink and white girl forward. "Though goodness knows why you should. You haven't dropped in for a month of Sundays, not since our Christmas dance."

"How do you do, Miss Dowling." Rickey avoided Elaine's eyes. The flush crept up to the roots of his hair.

The pink and white girl looked up at Rickey with round blue eyes. "Good afternoon," she said and demurely lowered her lashes.

"Call her Gertrude," Mrs. Dowling urged. "We needn't be dignified, living so close and all." She turned to the man in gray flannels. "You haven't met Mrs. Penfield's son, have you, Jim?"

"I haven't had that pleasure," he said in a pleasant voice. He looked at Rickey with kind gray eyes under shaggy brows. "I've heard a great deal about him."

"I guess you have." Mrs. Dowling beamed. "Not that I blame his dear mother for being proud of a son at Harvard. Mr. Connell, Mr. Penfield. And Miss— I didn't catch the name."

"Miss Archer," Rickey said.

"Seems funny you haven't met Jim," Mrs. Dowling continued, loudly, when the introductions were over. "But then you aren't at home much. Mr. Dowling and he have done business for years. We never used to see him and now he's always popping in. Not that we take any credit. Robin Hill seems to be much more attractive than our humble little shack. I wonder why?" She smiled archly at Mr. Connell.

"Now, Flora—" Mr. Connell said, drawing his eyebrows together.

"I do believe he's embarrassed!" Mrs. Dowling tilted. "Doesn't he look festive?" Her roguish glance included Rickey and Elaine. "He's gotten so dressy we hardly know him. Such a time as we had finding a posy for his buttonhole! You'd think, with all the flowers we have, it wouldn't be much trouble. But it had to be just exactly right. As I said to Trudy—"

"Mother—" Gertrude murmured.

"There's Sam," Mr. Connell said gruffly.

"Why so it is! Yoo hoo!" Mrs. Dowling called to a stout man in fawn-colored trousers, bending to putt on the green beyond the drive. "He doesn't hear me." She raised her voice. "Yoo hoo! Sa-am!"

Elaine choked with smothered laughter, and glanced at Rickey. He stood as though he were paralyzed, one hand grasping the back of his chair. The flush had receded. His face was white

beneath the tan. As she watched him, he came to life, flushed again when his eyes met hers.

"If you'll excuse us, Mrs. Dowling—" he said.

"Oh, now, you aren't going to run away." Mrs. Dowling beamed. "I thought we'd just sit down and have something cool to drink while the men are talking business. Oh, you've had something!" Her small bright eyes darted across the table. "Well, have something more. Waiter!"

"No, Mrs. Dowling, really—"

"It's half-past four." Elaine looked at her watch. "Rickey, we must fly!"

"Well, if you must, you must, I suppose." Mrs. Dowling looked crestfallen. Bring Miss—Miss—"

"Miss Archer," Gertrude prompted.

"Oh, yes—Miss Archer." Mrs. Dowling laughed. "I don't know why I keep forgetting the name. Something must be the matter with my mind. Bring Miss Archer to see us, Rickey. And tell your dear Mother I'll drop in some afternoon soon. I'm afraid she thinks I've neglected her. But, really, I'm always so busy. You'd think with all the servants we have— Jim! Oh, he's gone to meet Sam. Never mind. You'll see him at dinner tonight." Again her glance was roguish. "Well, by-by," she trilled, waving a plump hand sparkling with jewels. "As Trudy says, 'we'll be seeing you!'"

In Rickey's car, Elaine freed her smothered mirth. "Oh!" she gasped. "Isn't she unbeliev-

able? If you'd see her on the stage, you'd think she was exaggerated. Those earrings as big as marbles and all that yellow hair. And so *modest!* Rickey! Oh, dear!"

"She's awful!" Rickey stepped on the gas. The car lurched forward with a jolt. "Elaine, I was so ashamed."

"Poor little Trudy!" Elaine brushed tears of mirth from her lashes. "What a life she must lead! And poor Mr. Connell, too. I never saw anyone so embarrassed. He could have choked her with those dreadful pearls. *Rickey!* Look out! Do you want to break both of our necks?"

Chapter Eight: A DINNER IS DREADFUL

DINNER WAS NOT going well. It was a very good dinner, too. Susie, Eleanor thought, had quite outdone herself. The roast duck was delicious, meltingly, tenderly brown: the potato puff was perfection; the corn bread, baked to resemble real ears of corn, crumbled with richness.

But no one, except Aunt Harriet, seemed to have an appetite. Mr. Connell, looking so nice in his gray suit with a sprig of geranium in his buttonhole, merely made a pretense of eating. Rickey scarcely touched his generous helping of duck. Elaine never ate heartily, hardly enough to keep a bird alive. Even Lee, who had no notions about dieting, wasn't eating as she should. Aunt

Harriet, alone, enjoyed Susie's good dinner. In black lace and amethysts, with twinkling combs in her waved white hair, she ate slowly and thoroughly, not skipping anything.

Conversation was difficult. Eleanor, feeling increasingly nervous, talked brightly and urged the others to talk. Her efforts were not successful. Rickey was silent or talked in an undertone to Elaine. Mr. Connell was silent, also. Lee did her best to be helpful. She devoted herself to Mr. Connell, talking a little breathlessly, thinking of things to make him smile. Aunt Harriet, between helpings, commented upon the food.

Eleanor's smile became fixed. She took a great many drinks of water. What was the matter with Rickey? What had she done to offend him? She wanted him to be at his best for Mr. Connell. And Rickey was acting so stiff and polite. What possessed him?

"Won't you have more corn bread, dear?" she asked, trying to show him how much she loved him, wanting to coax him into a good humor. "It's the kind you especially like."

"No, thank you, Mother." Rickey avoided her pleading eyes, turned again to Elaine.

"So you're at Harvard." Mr. Connell glanced across the flowers at Rickey when Thalia had served the pudding.

"Yes," Rickey said briefly.

"A fine old institution," Mr. Connell said in

spite of Rickey's obvious lack of response. "I suppose you have jolly times. College boys—"

"Yes, indeed!" Eleanor interrupted. "Tell Mr. Connell about the time you and your friends borrowed the tally-ho, dear, and drove it down Brattle Street and little boys followed you thinking the circus had come to town."

"You have told him, Mother," Rickey said. "We drove a tally-ho. That was all."

Eleanor flushed. She felt hurt and rather foolish. The story she had suggested didn't sound amusing. And yet when Rickey had told it, a few days ago, she and Lee had laughed until they cried. She looked at Rickey, so handsome in his white flannels with a brown necktie that matched his eyes. She loved him so. Why couldn't he be his own charming self? What was the matter with Rickey?

"Susie didn't put enough brandy in the sauce," Aunt Harriet remarked. "It's good, but it would have been better with a little more flavoring. Henry—my husband—always liked his pudding sauce well flavored. I remember, once, when the Bishop was dining with us—"

A ripple of laughter, quickly stilled, followed Aunt Harriet's story. Well, what could they talk about now?

"What is your college?" Rickey asked Mr. Connell when the silence became oppressive. The remark coming so suddenly seemed intentionally

rude. Rickey was immediately aware of it and attempted to speak, but Mr. Connell laughed pleasantly and the momentary embarrassment vanished.

"I didn't go to college," he said.

"Mr. Connell had adventures instead," Lee said. "He ran away to sea when he was fourteen. He went to China and India and everywhere." She smiled up at Mr. Connell. "Tell Elaine and Rickey about the time you had tea in a Chinese mandarin's garden."

Rickey looked unenthusiastic but Elaine murmured, "Please do."

Darling Lee! Eleanor brightened. If Mr. Connell would tell the story—

But even Mr. Connell failed her.

"You make me sound like a Marco Polo," he said, returning Lee's friendly smile. "I'm afraid, after such an introduction, the story would be disappointing." His eyes, under shaggy brows, looked at Lee understandingly. It was as though they said, *I feel just as badly as you do about it, but there's nothing that can be done.*

The dinner dragged on interminably. It seemed to Eleanor that they were caught in a nightmare and must sit at the table forever. By the time Aunt Harriet had finished her coffee, Eleanor was so nervous that when Mr. Connell asked her if it wouldn't be pleasant to walk outside, she didn't want to be alone with him. Con-

conscious of Rickey's eyes, she suggested that they go into the music room. Perhaps Lee would sing—

Aunt Harriet murmured something about soda-mints and disappeared upstairs. Elaine and Rickey asked to be excused. But they didn't go far away. Eleanor, moving about the music room, adjusting the blinds, lighting the lamp, finding an ash tray for Mr. Connell's cigar, heard them talking on the veranda, saw the gleaming tips of their cigarettes.

*"Swing low, sweet chariot,
Coming for to carry me home—"*

Lee sang softly, feeling sorry for Cousin Eleanor. The dinner had been dreadful and Cousin Eleanor had wanted it to be nice. She wondered if Mr. Connell, in his spruce gray suit with a sprig of geranium in his buttonhole, had come for a special purpose tonight. Cousin Eleanor had tried to tell her something this morning. She had been happy and excited all day, like a shy little girl.

*"Way down upon the Swanee river
Far, far away—"*

Lee sang when the first song was finished. Mr. Connell seemed more at ease now. He sat in the armchair beside the piano, smoking, looking

across the room at Cousin Eleanor seated among the cushions on the love-seat. There was sympathy and understanding in his eyes under the shaggy brows. It was—well, *funny*, to think of middle-aged people falling in love. And yet, why not? Mr. Connell was kind and generous. Of course, after Cousin Richard and Rickey's Uncle Roger whose portrait hung in the hall, he seemed burly and rather tough. But he *was* fine and strong. He was someone you could trust.

*"All the world is sad and dreary
Everywhere I roam—"*

Rickey had spoiled the dinner. It was rude of him to be so distant and aloof. He had hurt his mother dreadfully. Lee tried to harden her heart against Rickey. She couldn't, no matter how much she tried.

"Is there something you like especially?" she asked Mr. Connell, wanting to make up for Rickey's rudeness.

"Mavourneen," he suggested.

Lee smiled and played the introductory chords. Smiling, she sang—

"Come back to Erin, Mavourneen, Mavourneen."

Mr. Connell settled back in his chair. She sang extraordinarily well, he thought. Her voice had

a poignant quality, infinitely appealing. She might go far with the right sort of training. He wondered if that were possible. Dowling had told him that the family at Robin Hill was having financial difficulties. Certainly the place had a run-down appearance. It must have been charming once. It would be interesting to restore it if—

He looked at Lee seated at the piano in the glow of the shaded lamp. Pretty, friendly little thing. Would she resent it if he should offer to help her? Better not. He wouldn't enjoy being snubbed again. The boy! He had not anticipated that obstacle. He would have to win the boy's confidence if he could. Was he really a snob, or had he been embarrassed? It was a shock to a boy, no doubt, when he suspected that his mother was thinking of marriage. Well, there was plenty of time. . . .

*"Mavourneen, Mavourneen
The gray dawn is breaking"*

Eleanor's fingers pleated her handkerchief. Lee sang beautifully, she thought. She would have enjoyed the music if she hadn't been so nervous and upset. Her head ached dreadfully. She wished Mr. Connell would go. She wanted to lie down on the soft lounge in her room, to have Rickey come in and kiss her good night.

What had she done to offend Rickey? If she knew what he was saying to Elaine—she strained toward the window, heard the low murmur of their voices. Rickey, her darling, her life! The things Mr. Connell might do for them seemed unimportant now. She almost wished she had never met him, had never asked him to dinner.

Eleanor sighed, not noticing that Lee had finished her song. The sigh sounded loud in the quiet room. Mr. Connell looked at his watch.

"I must go," he said, rising. "I had no idea it was so late."

It wasn't late. The hands of the clock pointed to quarter past nine. Eleanor felt that she should urge him to stay. But her head was aching. She wanted to be alone.

"Thank you for the music." Mr. Connell held Lee's hand for a moment. "Thank you for everything."

Eleanor walked with him to the door.

"You look tired," he said gently. "Go to bed."

His thought for her touched her. He looked so big and so gentle, so nice in his gray suit. It would be sweet to have sympathy, to have someone notice when she was tired. She forgot the dreadful dinner, forgot Rickey, forgot that for a moment she had wished she had never known him. Her hand touched his arm.

"I am tired. It's silly of me," she said.

"The weather is so warm," Mr. Connell said

kindly. "I feel it myself." His hand covered hers. "Have a good rest. Tomorrow—"

"Tomorrow—?" She raised her head, a question in her eyes.

"I think I can stay over." He smiled down at her so gravely that her heart gave a sudden lurch. Looking up at him, she wondered how she could ever have thought he was ugly. "Will you let me kidnap you tomorrow afternoon?" he asked. "I know a pleasant place to have dinner. Will you go with me?"

"Yes," she said, feeling her cheeks grow warm.

"Good-by until tomorrow, then. Good night and pleasant dreams."

Chapter Nine: RICKEY EXTRACTS A PROMISE

ELEANOR SLIPPED into a negligee. Moving quietly, she tidied the room, hanging her dress in the wardrobe, stuffing wads of tissue paper into the toes of her slippers. Then she sat at her dressing-table and looked into the mirror. At the sound of a rap at the door, she hurried to the chaise-longue beside the long double window.

"Come in," she called.

Rickey opened the door, closed it, walked toward her across the room.

"Aren't you feeling well?" he asked.

"My head is aching." She pressed her hand against her temple. The wide lace ruffle fell back

from her rounded arm.

"I don't wonder." Rickey drew a chair close to the lounge. "I should think your head would ache, trying to entertain that man."

"Rickey!" she said faintly, pleadingly.

"You're too kind-hearted," Rickey said. "You let people impose on you. Now why, on a hot night like this, should you have invited him to dinner?"

"He's been kind," Eleanor murmured, grateful for the shadows and the dim rosy glow of the lamps on her dressing-table. "He's really a pleasant person, dear. He took Lee and me to the theater last winter. Don't you remember? I'm sure I wrote you about it."

Rickey did not listen.

"Mother," he said, almost before Eleanor had finished, "will you promise me something?"

"What?" she asked, a little pain in her heart.

"I want you to promise that you won't ask that man here again."

"But darling—why?"

"Oh, I know there's no truth in what that Dowling woman implied. But other people won't know. Everyone heard. Anne Victoria Phillips, for one. You know what a gossip she is."

"What do you mean, dear? What about Mrs. Dowling?"

"Elaine and I were at the club this afternoon." Rickey, remembering, flushed. "Mrs. Dowling

and her dear little Trudy arrived with your Mr. Connell. If you could have seen her, Mother, all bright pink silk and white fur and reeking with perfume. She screeches like a peacock. Elaine—I was ashamed."

"What—" Eleanor hesitated. "What did Mrs. Dowling say?"

"She was coy and roguish." Rickey's voice was scornful. "More so than usual, I mean. She teased Mr. Connell about you. She didn't say it in words but anyone could infer—and everyone did—that he was about to propose or marry you or something."

Eleanor murmured a vague protest. Rickey paid no attention.

"I believe he was, Mother," he continued. "I believe he had come courting."

"Rickey—!"

"All dressed up in that light gray suit with a flower in his buttonhole. And asking you to take a walk!" Rickey laughed. "I suppose he would have led you to the fountain. He wouldn't think a proposal was authentic unless the surroundings were romantic."

"Darling—!" Eleanor laughed, too, a laugh that was like a sob.

"You certainly knocked him for a loop!" Rickey mocked lightly, laughing. "He looked at you like a bear looking at a nice, pink-frosted cake."

"Rickey, please—"

"A tame bear, Mother. Elaine noticed it, too. But she said he looked at you like a faithful big dog, a St. Bernard or something—"

"Elaine shouldn't— Oh, dear!"

Eleanor searched for her handkerchief. She was laughing so that she couldn't stop. Or was she crying? Tears ran down over her cheeks.

"I suppose you would have accepted him. You wouldn't have wanted to hurt his feelings. You're a babe-in-the-woods, Nelly darling. I don't know what would become of you if you hadn't me to take care of you."

"I couldn't *live*—" She caught his hand, held it against her cheek.

"You will promise, won't you?" Rickey bent toward her. He wasn't laughing now. He was very much in earnest. "If you have him here, if people see you with him, they'll think that woman is right. You should have seen Anne Victoria's face! She was panting with impatience to lope off and spread the news. Everyone in West Grove will know, everyone in the valley. They'll say we're after his money. There couldn't be any other reason. After Father— There isn't, is there, Mother?"

Eleanor remained silent. Deep pink stained her face and throat. Rickey drew his hand away, grew rigid in his chair. His expression frightened Eleanor. He was drawing away from her, Rickey,

her little boy, her handsome son.

"No, oh, no!" She caught his hand again, drew him toward her until his head rested on her breast. He lay there a moment, relaxed. Eleanor's lips touched his hair. Rickey raised his head.

"You will promise me, Mother? I don't want people to talk about you. I don't want them to think we're intimate with those Dowlings. Elaine— You will promise, won't you?"

She promised, at last, and lay back on the lounge looking so white and tired that Rickey asked, "Is your head aching badly?"

She nodded.

"I'll rub it for you. Where is that violet smelling stuff?"

"On the dressing-table. No, that's toilet water. The crystal bottle, dear."

There was a smell of violets and ammonia. Rickey's fingers met in the center of Eleanor's forehead, moved down toward her temples. Eleanor closed her eyes. Luxuriating in Rickey's care, she forgot, for a moment, that she had promised not to see Mr. Connell again. She saw herself growing old beautifully, and Rickey taking care of her. "He is devoted to his mother," people would say, seeing them together.

The pain was growing less. Sweet night air came in at the open windows. Rickey's fingers felt gentle and cool. The violet smell was pleas-

ant. Eleanor nestled deeper into the pillows. She could drift happily into sleep this way, with Rickey stroking her head—

The strokes became hurried, irregular. Eleanor opened her eyes, glanced up at Rickey bending over the head of the lounge. He looked impatient. She sighed and smiled.

"That will do nicely," she said.

"Is it better?"

"Much better. Thank you, dear."

"Then I'll go," he said. "Elaine is waiting downstairs."

Bending, he kissed her absently, and walked quickly from the room. Eleanor heard his footsteps on the stairs, hurrying down to Elaine. The feeling of being close to Rickey vanished with his receding footsteps. She remembered what she had promised. Sighing, she went to her desk, selected a sheet of notepaper, dipped her pen in the ink.

Lee, coming in with a tray, found her there some time later.

"It's so warm," she said, pausing inside the door. "I thought you might like something cold to drink."

Eleanor glanced up from the paper-strewn desk. Torn bits of paper lay scattered on the floor.

"Thank you," she said absently.

Lee set the tray, with its pitcher and glass, on

the table beside the lounge and started to leave the room. Eleanor called her back.

"Will you do something for me in the morning?" she asked.

"Yes, certainly, Cousin Eleanor."

"Will you—will you take this to the Dowlings for me?" Eleanor held out an envelope. She seemed dreadfully embarrassed. "I'd send Jake but—"

"I'll go." Lee took the envelope.

"Early?"

"As soon as I open my eyes. And dress," she added, smiling.

"Thank you, dear," Eleanor sighed, pressed her hand against her forehead. "Thank you for everything."

In her room Lee examined the envelope. It was addressed to *Mr. Connell—Kindness of Shirley*. The letters were uncertain and ran downhill. She sat tapping the envelope upon the edge of the table. For a moment she felt detached from Rickey, as though she saw him without the glamorous trappings she had given him. *Had* he deliberately tried to snub Mr. Connell at dinner? Why—why that would make him appear a cad. No, he had been embarrassed. It was a slip. Dimly she was aware of Elaine, changing Rickey in some subtle way, moulding him, drawing him away from her. Her momentary anger with Rickey was transferred to Elaine. The violence

of the emotion surprised her. She—she hated Elaine. That was because she loved Rickey—would always love him. . . .

The letter slipped from her fingers. Picking it up, she arose and stood irresolutely. Perhaps if she avoided Rickey, put him out of her mind, it would give her a chance to see everything clearly. Perhaps—but it seemed doubtful.

Chapter Ten: BREAKFAST AT OLD MICHAEL'S SHACK

"HELLO!" John called as Lee came out through the sun-porch door.

"Hello!" she answered, swinging a riding-crop.

He watched her walking toward him across the lawn. She looked like a boy, he thought, in her riding-breeches and boots, with a white shirt open at her throat and her hair curling out under a soft little pull-on hat.

"You didn't forget this time," he said when she had reached the drive where he stood holding the bridle reins of the horses.

She smiled. "I tied a string around my finger," she said. "Oh!" Her eyes lighted swiftly with pleasure. "You brought Dixie for me!"

"There was only Dixie to bring." John's smile faded. "Grandfather sold the horses last week—all but King and Dixie."

"Oh, John! Why?"

"Couldn't afford to keep them."

"Has—has something happened?" she asked in quick alarm.

"Nothing overwhelming. Securities are down and dividends scarce. I don't suppose that interests you."

"No," she said. "I'm afraid I don't understand much about it." Her brow cleared. She laid her cheek against Dixie's glossy coat. "I'm glad you didn't sell Dixie."

"Sell Dixie!" John pretended astonishment. "We couldn't do that. We'd be arrested. Dixie belongs to you." He paused and then said abruptly. "I wish I were an artist."

Lee, surprised, glanced up. "Why?" she asked.

"I'd like to paint you that way. You and Dixie," he said.

She laughed. "It might make a grocery calendar."

"Calendar!" John looked hurt. "It would be a masterpiece. No one would have money enough to buy it. It would hang in the most exclusive gallery in a private room of its own. We'd call it— Well, I'll decide that later. Up you go."

They rode under the maples that bordered the drive, through the gateway, along the valley road.

"That house!" John said as they passed the Dowling place. "Sans-Souci! What a name!"

"It sounds like an amusement park." Lee looked at the white pillars of the house beyond the grilled iron wall. Where was Mr. Connell

now? Cousin Eleanor never mentioned him. How long was it? Over a month ago, the day before Elaine had returned to New York.

Elaine! She saw her silky black hair, her odd dark eyes, her smooth, honey-colored skin. What had Elaine done to Rickey? He had changed. He was restless and moody. Nothing seemed to interest him. They hadn't done any of the gay things she had planned during the days of waiting for him to return from his visit to Maine. Rickey went for long walks alone, lay in a deck-chair under the linden, smoking, looking up into the sky. He seemed alive only when the mailman brought a letter from New York.

Other girls had interested Rickey. He had fallen lightly in love a dozen times since he was sixteen years old. This wasn't a flirtation. He never spoke of Elaine to her. That made her think that Elaine was important. He had talked to her of the others, lightly, teasingly, joking about his conquests. She hadn't minded, especially. She had known that Rickey wasn't in love with any of them. Why didn't he speak of Elaine?

She had tried not to be depressed by the change in Rickey. She had practiced, as usual, gone to parties, helped Cousin Eleanor give a luncheon. But she was depressed. It was wrong to let Rickey's affairs absorb her. She fought against it. But nothing seemed very much fun. She had looked

forward so eagerly to having him home. Oh, how she hated Elaine! . . .

"Mmm?" she asked, thinking John had asked her a question.

"I didn't say anything." John smiled.

"I thought you did."

"That was your conscience reminding you that you are neglecting me."

"Am I?" She smiled. "I won't. I like to ride with you, John."

They rode through open stretches of sunshine, past farms and meadows and the walls of country estates, through cool, earth-smelling woods.

John asked, "Do you really like to ride with me? Are you having a nice time, Lee?"

"Mmm!" she answered, turning to smile.

He was satisfied. The murmured answer pleased him. She looked happy, he thought. Her eyes were shining. A wild-rose pink stained her cheeks. She rode remarkably well. But then, he remembered, there had been horses at Robin Hill until a few years ago. He liked the way she sat in the saddle, the jaunty tilt of her head. This might be their last ride together. She had said she was going away. The thought sent a pang through his heart.

They stopped at a spring along the road leading back to Robin Hill. The water bubbled through a crevice in the rocks and fell into a rocky basin edged with moss and feathers of fern.

Someone had left a tin cup there.

"It's probably covered with germs." John held the cup for Lee to drink.

"I don't mind. The water tastes good."

"Are you hungry?"

"Starved! I always am when I'm hungry."

"So am I." John swung back into his saddle.

"I'm taking you somewhere for breakfast."

"To Farmfields? That will be nice."

"No, not there."

"Where?"

"It's a surprise," John said, and refused to answer questions.

They turned into a road through the woods. It was wide at first and fairly clear, but presently it narrowed. John rode ahead. Dixie picked her way over roots and stumps, through tangles of twisting vines. The underbrush was dense, blackberry bushes, crowding ferns, sumac turning red.

Lee felt completely lost. And yet there was something familiar about the uphill road. She thought of grapes. Now, why?

Presently she knew. Near the top of the hill stood a giant oak. Wild grapevines twined about the tree and from a low limb hung a looping grapevine swing.

"I know where we're going," she called to John.

"Do you?" He smiled over his shoulder.

"Old Michael's shack."

"Right! I wondered if you would remember."

As Dixie climbed the last steep grade of the hill Lee thought of old Michael. He had once been a hired man at the Waltons' and had built a shack at the top of the hill, where, when he was too old to work, he had gone to live. She recalled him clearly, a brown little gnome of a man. She had visited Michael, when she was a child, with John's younger brothers and Rickey. But they had come by another way. She remembered the fairy tales Michael had told, and the grapevine swing on a near-by tree.

But the shack wasn't as she had remembered it. Her eyes widened when they came to the clearing at the top of the hill. There were new windows, a shingled roof, and a front porch painted green.

"How do you like my house?" John asked as she slid from the saddle into his arms.

"Is it yours? Did you do it, John?"

"With a little help here and there." His arms released her slowly.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

Smiling, she pulled off her hat. Sunlight, slipping through thickly branched trees, brightened her soft brown hair.

"I've hardly seen you since Rickey came home." John tied the horses to neighboring trees.

"Do you like it, Lee?"

"It's lovely here." She stood on the porch, looked down across sloping treetops, down across

the valley. "How high it is! How far you can see! Robin Hill looks like a Christmas-tree house. And Farmfields, too. I used to visit Michael. But we came by another way, that path down through the woods."

"There's a road in from the other side. You can drive in with a car. I brought you the most difficult way, to make it more mysterious. Come inside." John unlatched the door.

"What a grand fireplace! I could walk inside it." Lee's eyes moved swiftly around the one long room that formed the main part of the cabin. "You've stained the beams and walls. And there's a new kitchen." She looked into the small room at the rear. "Are you going to live here, John?"

"Not entirely." Her enthusiasm delighted him. He watched her moving about the cabin, her hands in the pockets of her trousers, her blue eyes shining, the wild-rose pink in her cheeks. "I want a place to work. It's difficult at home."

"This is a perfect place," she said. "You must have calico curtains and bright rugs and a comfortable chair by the hearth."

"Pretend that this is a comfortable chair." John dragged a nail keg forward. "I'm going to get your breakfast."

"Let me." She followed him into the kitchen. "You have an oil stove," she said.

"It's considered romantic to broil bacon over a camp fire." John, looking too big for the tiny

kitchen, opened tins and paper bags. "But a stove is more reliable. I'm too hungry to take chances."

"So am I." She smiled happily. "Let me make the coffee."

"Get out!" John pushed her gently. "You can trust the coffee to me. I'm a wonderful cook."

She laughed.

"You must learn to take me seriously," John said. "Go into the living-room or the conservatory. Act like a guest."

They had breakfast on the porch. A packing case served for a table. There were nail kegs for chairs. Lee had found a few sprays of goldenrod in the clearing near the cabin and an empty bottle for a vase.

"I don't like your decorations," John said, seating himself opposite her across the packing-box table.

"Why not?" Lee glanced at the dusty plumes of the goldenrod just faintly turning yellow. "I couldn't find any orchids. Do they give you hay fever?" she asked.

"Worse than that." John smiled, but his eyes were grave. "They mean that summer is nearly over."

His voice held an unaccustomed note. He looked at her so strangely. Lee turned, gazing down into the valley. Was John sad because she was going away? The thought disturbed her a

little. She didn't want him to be sad. Well—a little, perhaps. But not very sad.

The thought drifted out of her mind. How high it was here, how sunny and still! There, far below, was the roof of Robin Hill just visible through the foliage of the trees. What was Rickey doing now? Was he pacing along the drive, waiting for the mailman, for a letter from Elaine?

It would be lovely to have breakfast here with Rickey. Why hadn't he wanted to do the sort of things she had planned? He might have discovered that being with her was fun. Would he ever really see her? There—she was running away from John again. It wasn't polite. She had said that she wouldn't. She turned to him, smiling an apology.

John, too, was smiling. She thought she must have imagined that his voice had held an unaccustomed note. He didn't appear to be sad because she was going away. John had a nice smile. It did something gay to his eyes.

"I like summer," he said lightly. "I'm always sorry when it is over. But I like autumn, too. I'm a very adaptable person. Will you please pass the salt?"

Chapter Eleven: UNDER THE ATTIC ROOF

THE RAIN made a drumming sound on the roof. Gray light came in through the attic windows.

Lee surveyed a row of trunks, netted with cobwebs, filmed with dust. How odd and old-fashioned most of them looked! There was one with a rounded top. She read the faded labels: Paris, Venice, Interlaken, London.

Interlaken was in Switzerland where fields of gentians grew. John had told her about them, blue fields of gentians, as blue as the sky. Paris, Venice, London—

The trunk had accompanied Grandmother Penfield on her wedding-tour abroad. Lee thought of the clothes it had held: stiff silk dresses with rustling trains, starched white petticoats deeply bordered with embroidery, Chantilly lace, a cloak trimmed with swansdown, perhaps, a bonnet of parma violets with strings that tied under the chin.

It was strange to think that the trunk was there and Grandmother Penfield was dead. It made people seem of less importance than things. Lee traced a design in the dust on the rounded top of the trunk. Had Grandmother Penfield realized the dreams she'd had when she packed the trunk for her wedding-tour? Did anyone ever? Lee felt vaguely unhappy. It was thinking of going away, perhaps. Perhaps it was the rain.

"What are you doing?"

She turned, startled. She hadn't heard Rickey enter. Faint color bloomed in her cheeks.

"I'm deciding which trunk to take," she said,

"for books and blankets and things."

"Where's everybody?" Rickey threw himself down on the old school-room sofa and elevated his feet. Puffs of dust swirled into the air. The springs sagged and creaked.

"This is Thursday." Lee sat on a trunk. "Aunt Harriet is having lunch with Miss Fanny. Susie is making peach preserves and Jake is cleaning the cellar. Thalia's just sitting somewhere. I, as you see, am—"

"Where's Mother?"

"She went in to the city."

"In the rain?" Rickey looked surprised.

"What for?"

"I don't know." Lee swung her heels against the trunk. "Where were you for lunch?"

"At the Waltons'." Rickey lit a cigarette, blew smoke rings into the air. "Ned is home. John's an odd duck, isn't he?"

"Odd? Why? I think he's nice."

"He turned down a chance to go with Tindall and Brooks. They're the swankiest firm of architects in Philadelphia, in case you aren't informed."

"I know."

"Think of turning down a chance like that!" Rickey blew out a cloud of smoke. "It would be swell to work for Tindall and Brooks. You have tea with lovely ladies. You design their country homes."

"I don't think John cares especially for having tea with ladies."

"Apparently not." Rickey gazed at the ceiling. "Do you remember the shack where old Michael used to live?"

"Yes."

"John is fixing it up. He says he's going to work there."

"I know." Lee thought of the cabin on the hill, remembered her breakfast there with John, remembered the dusty goldenrod just faintly turning yellow. Why had she been embarrassed? She needn't have worried, she thought. She had seen John several times since. He hadn't indicated that her going away would cause him great distress. She could smile about it now. But it had seemed real, for a moment, real and very disturbing—

"John can be a hermit if he wants to. It's all right with me. Everyone to his own liking, as the old lady said when she kissed the goat. Or was it a cow? Not that I care particularly." Rickey rolled over and propped his head on his hand. "Why don't you pay some attention to me?" he asked plaintively. "You sit there smiling to yourself. I'm bored. Why don't you amuse me?"

"Too busy." Lee opened the lid of the trunk. "Oh, dear, it's full of things!"

"Dump them," Rickey advised.

"I can't half see."

"There's a very tasty piano lamp." Rickey rose from the sofa, pushed forward a tall lamp with a fringed silk mushroom of a shade. "It seems to be connected," he said and turned the switch.

Rosy light filled the attic room. Lee burrowed into the trunk. "Here's Cousin Richard's opera hat!" She held up a flat black object. Rickey snapped it open, tilted it rakishly over one eye.

"How's that?" he asked.

Lee looked up and smiled. "You look like the Count of Monte Cristo," she said.

"The Count didn't wear an opera hat."

"Oh, yes he did, when he— *Rickey!* These were your first long trousers!"

Rickey laughed. "I felt so important," he said. "I expected to grow a mustache over night."

"My flowered parasol!" Lee smoothed the faded silk ruffles. "I thought it was beautiful. You gave it to me for my birthday when I was eight or nine years old."

They bent, together, over the trunk in the pool of rosy light. They laughed, remembering things that had happened a very long time ago. Rickey was in his most beguiling mood, gay and ridiculous. Lee felt light-hearted and happy. Rickey's nonsense banished unhappy thoughts. It was lovely to be there with him, up under the attic roof. She'd had so few happy hours with Rickey. He had seemed remote and restless since Elaine

had left

He wasn't remote today. She felt very close to him, sitting beside him on the old school-room sofa. They had found a kodak album at the bottom of the trunk. Lee turned the pages slowly. Rickey bent toward her to see the pictures. She could feel his shoulder brushing hers, his cheek against her hair.

"That's you, Lee." Rickey laughed. Lee looked at the fading snapshot.

"In the costume I wore in the dancing-class play. What was I, Rickey? A Columbine?"

"Lord! I don't remember!" Rickey turned a page. His hand touched hers. Could he hear her heart, beating so quickly, so lightly? "There's Ned in his bathing suit. Wasn't he a scrawny kid? Who is that upside down?"

Lee's curly head bent over the album.

"Blakely. It's a double exposure. You must have taken that. Rickey!" She laughed softly, excitedly. "Here you are in your armor!"

They looked at the snapshot of ten-year-old Rickey astride a Shetland pony. He wore armor made of disks of tin and a jaunty plume in his hat.

"Wasn't I magnificent?" Rickey laughed again.

"Indeed you were. Sir Galahad in all his glory."

"Sir Galahad nothing! King Arthur himself. Or Richard-the-Lion-Hearted. I'm sure we had

some of Ivanhoe mixed in with the Round Table stories." He glanced from the album to Lee. "Sir Faithful," he said.

She looked up at him quickly, her cheeks flushing with pleasure. "Rickey! Do you remember that?"

"Of course I do." He smiled teasingly. "Do you remember the promises you made?"

"Yes," she said softly, happily, pleased because Rickey remembered. "You took advantage of them. You bossed me frightfully."

"I suppose I did. I do now, don't I, Lee?"

"What?" she said. Her lashes curved down against her cheeks.

"Boss you," he said. "Impose on you. Send you trotting on errands."

"I'd do anything for you, Rickey." Lee knew a moment of panic. She hadn't meant to say that. What would Rickey think? "It's a habit," she added quickly. "It's something I can't seem to help."

"You're sweet," Rickey said gently.

"Sweet!" she protested, unable to hush the singing notes in her voice. "You make me sound like a Valentine or like a pink candy heart."

"You are," he said. He tweaked the curl which had escaped from the knot at the nape of her neck. "And you're awfully pretty, Lee."

Lee caught a quick, happy breath. Her heart felt suddenly light again. Rickey had noticed that

she was pretty! She wanted to laugh. She wanted to cry. It was silly to care so dreadfully. It was something she couldn't help.

"You've kissed the Blarney Stone, Rickey," she said, looking down at her hands.

"I feel sentimental." He smiled. "I always do when it rains. These souvenirs of our childhood have—what do they call it?—touched a tender chord. You've been swell to me. You've helped me out of so many scrapes. Sir Faithful," he said softly, teasingly. His hand covered hers for a moment. "Always be nice to me, Lee."

"I probably will," she said, making her voice sound careless and bright. "That is a habit, too."

"It's a very good habit." Rickey drew his hand away to light a cigarette. "Don't ever break it."

They were silent for an interval. The kodak album slipped down to the floor. Rickey leaned back against the sofa, smoking, smiling at his thoughts, watching the rain against the window.

The quiet was lovely, Lee thought. Her eyes moved slowly around the room. She saw Rickey's bright head against the dull upholstery of the sofa, saw the scattered piles of odds and ends they had pulled from the trunk, saw the gray shadows beyond the glow of the lamp.

"Isn't it strange—?" She paused, suddenly shy.

"Mmmm?" The murmured sound was an absent-minded question.

Lee did not finish the question. Wasn't it

strange, she had meant to ask, that there were moments you would never forget? She knew she would never forget the shadows and the rosy light, the smell of mothballs and dust and smoke, Cousin Richard's opera hat, the sound of the rain. She would never forget the feeling of being close to Rickey.

But she couldn't tell him. She couldn't complete her thought. It wasn't important to Rickey. It didn't mean to him what it did to her. He was merely getting through a rainy afternoon.

"Isn't what strange?" he asked absently.

"Isn't it strange," she asked, instead, "how drowsy the rain makes you feel?" That wasn't interesting, she thought. But it was the best she could do. Why hadn't she thought of something amusing, something to bring his thoughts back to her, something to make him smile?

But she needn't have bothered to substitute a question. Rickey, apparently, hadn't heard her remark about the rain. When she turned to him, he was looking at his watch.

"Quarter of five!" he exclaimed.

"Have you forgotten something?" Lee asked, surprised by his startled expression.

"Good Lord, yes!" Rickey rose hurriedly from the sofa. "I was to have called Elaine at half-past four!"

Looking anxious and expectant, he bolted out of the room. Lee heard him plunging down the

stairs, impatient to reach the telephone, eager to talk to Elaine. That was why he had been gay, she thought, and the weight returned to her heart. He had been anticipating a long-distance talk with Elaine. All afternoon, while she had been so happy, Rickey was thinking of Elaine. His compliments, his tenderness were for Elaine. Lee had received them merely because she was there.

She sat alone on the sofa. A moment before the attic room had seemed bright and warm and intimate. It was only the attic now, dusty and smelling of mothballs. Rickey had taken the glamour with him. There was nothing left of him except the thinning smoke of his cigarette, a mashed stub on the floor.

She turned off the light and went downstairs.

Chapter Twelve: LEE MAKES A SACRIFICE

LEE STOOD at the window in the second-floor hall looking out at the rain. Rickey had taken the telephone extension into his room. The door was a little open. She heard his voice, rough with impatience, talking to the operator. There was a pause. Then Rickey said softly, caressingly, "Hello! Hello, Elaine—"

Lee turned blindly toward her room. Cousin Eleanor's door opened. "Lee," Cousin Eleanor called in a queer, husky whisper.

"Yes?" Lee paused, surprised. She didn't know that Cousin Eleanor had returned from the city.

"Will you come here, please?" Why was Cousin Eleanor whispering? Her voice sounded as though she had been crying. "But, darling—" Rickey's voice said, talking to Elaine.

Lee swallowed hard. She was smiling when she opened the door and stepped into Cousin Eleanor's room.

The smile faded at once. Cousin Eleanor, looking white and dazed, sat on the side of the bed. She hadn't removed her hat and coat. Her light summer fur scarf was beaded with drops of rain. Trickles of moisture ran down on the organdy counterpane.

"What is it, Cousin Eleanor? What has happened?" she asked.

"I don't know how to tell you, Lee." Eleanor began to cry.

"Don't try just now," Lee said gently. "Get these wet things off. I'll light the fire."

The fire was laid in the fireplace under the carved white mantel. Wondering, frightened, Lee touched a match to the paper. Flames spurted up to kindle the wood. She pulled the chaise-longue close.

"You shouldn't have gone out in the rain." Lee stooped to draw off Eleanor's slippers. "Your teeth are chattering. Your feet are sopping wet."

"I am cold. The fire looks so cosy. Oh, Lee!"

"Don't talk now." What had happened? Lee was really alarmed. Cousin Eleanor was emotional, she thought, bringing a dressing-gown from the wardrobe. She was always getting upset about something. Trivial things, usually: the cleaners had spoiled a dress or the sponge cake fell or she couldn't remember where she had put a necklace. This was something more than that. She had never seen Cousin Eleanor so dazed and frightened and white. Not even when Cousin Richard died. What dreadful thing had happened?

"I'll bring your dinner up here." Lee led Eleanor to the chaise-longue. She seemed bewildered. She was as docile as a child. "I'll get you some warm milk now." She tucked pillows under Eleanor's head, covered her with a quilt.

Eleanor caught her hand. "Where's Rickey?" she asked.

"In his room I think. Shall I call him?"

"No! Oh, no!" Eleanor's eyes looked wide and frightened. "Don't call Rickey. Don't leave me, Lee. There's something I must tell you."

Lee's heart almost stopped beating. Why did Cousin Eleanor look so frightened when she spoke of Rickey? Had Rickey done something disgraceful? She pulled a footstool close. Eleanor caught her hand again.

"We're ruined," she said.

"Ruined—" Lee repeated. It sounded dramatic, like a line from a play. The setting was

theatrical, too: the fire, Cousin Eleanor wrapped in the soft satin quilt, the rain against the windows. "What—what do you mean?" she asked, feeling like a character in the play.

"I—we've lost a great deal of money. Almost all that I had," Cousin Eleanor said between sobs. "I had a letter from the brokers. That's why I went into town. They wanted me to send them more money. I can't. We'll simply lose everything."

"Everything!" Lee was stunned. She felt as though the roof of the old stone house was crashing down on their heads.

"Not everything. There'll be enough to live on, if we are very careful." She repeated the words as though she had learned them like a lesson. "But Rickey can't go back to Harvard—"

She wouldn't continue. How tired and frightened she looked sitting there.

"He must," Lee said quickly, earnestly. "It's his last year. There must be something we can do. Can't you borrow money at the bank?"

"I tried." Eleanor shivered under the rose-patterned quilt. "I went to see Mr. Phillips this afternoon. They won't lend me another cent. I must say I think they're unreasonable." Her misery turned momentarily to indignation. "Considering the fact that Father Penfield was a director of the bank, I must say I think—"

"Why don't you talk to Judge Walton?"

"I have. And do you know what he suggested?"

Lee didn't, of course. She clasped her arms around her knees and waited for Cousin Eleanor to continue.

"He said he'd give Rickey a job in his office!" Eleanor's voice was indignant, too, as indignant as her expression. "He doesn't understand." The indignation gave way to a fresh torrent of tears. "A degree from Harvard means so much. Rickey might go so far. He can't settle down in a country law office. Oh, dear— Lee, what can we do?"

Lee knew what they could do. She had known as soon as Cousin Eleanor had said there wasn't money enough to send Rickey back to Harvard. She had some money—enough. If she didn't go to New York. She looked into the dancing flames. She would have Grandmother Bell's legacy, when she was twenty-one. A year wouldn't make so much difference to her. It meant everything to Rickey.

"I don't care for myself," Eleanor said. "But to have this happen to Rickey! How can I tell him? How *can* I tell him, Lee?"

"You needn't." Lee turned from the fire to Cousin Eleanor, lying among the pillows beneath the rose quilt. She looked so white and so miserable. There were shadows under her eyes. "Don't worry about it," she said. "You can have my money for Rickey. I'll wait until I am

twenty-one. I'll go to New York next year."

"No, no!" Eleanor protested. "I—we can't do that." Her voice sounded shocked. But Lee, watching, saw her eyes brighten a little, saw a tinge of color in her cheeks.

"Why not?" Lee turned again to the fire. "You've taken care of me since I was six years old," she said slowly, as though she were talking to herself. "You were so kind to me, you and Grandfather and Cousin Richard. You made me feel that Robin Hill was my home. You gave me a happy childhood. This is something that I can do for you."

"But have you considered, dear?" Eleanor asked. "Oh, no, we can't let you make such a sacrifice. We—I can't let you do it, Lee."

"It isn't a sacrifice. Don't make it seem heroic. I'm not a heroine, Cousin Eleanor. It only means waiting a year. This is something I *want* to do."

"Do you?" Eleanor asked eagerly. "Do you really *want* to, Lee?"

"Yes," she said, looking into the fire. "I wanted to belong here when I was a child. I loved Robin Hill. You made me feel that I did belong. You can't change that feeling now. This is something I want to do."

She was telling only half of the truth. Lee watched the changing lights in the fire. She wanted to do it because she had had a happy childhood, because she loved Robin Hill. But

she wanted to do it for Rickey, too. Sir Faithful! A faint smile curved her lips.

"We needn't tell Rickey, need we?" Eleanor asked anxiously. "He wouldn't use your money."

"Oh, no," Lee interrupted. "Of course we can't tell him. We mustn't let Rickey know."

"Don't decide now," Eleanor said, looking quite recovered and pretty again. "Think it over, Lee."

"I don't need to think, Cousin Eleanor." Lee rose from the stool, stood, smiling, beside the chaise-longue. "It's already decided," she said.

It was decided long ago. It was decided when she was a child and Rickey was a handsome boy with tousled blond hair. She could never let Rickey down. She loved him.

"You're a darling, Lee." Eleanor caught her hand, pulled her down until her curly head touched Eleanor's cheek. "I don't know how to thank you."

"You needn't," Lee said softly. "I want to do it for you and for—"

"For Rickey," Eleanor said.

"Yes—for Rickey," said Lee.

Chapter Thirteen: JUDY ASKS QUESTIONS

RICKEY RETURNED to Cambridge. Lee remained at Robin Hill. "I have decided to wait until next year," she told people who asked why she hadn't

gone to New York.

The answer satisfied casual inquiries. It failed to satisfy Aunt Harriet. "I know all about it," she remarked one afternoon as she sat on a bench in the arbor watching Lee gather grapes for jam.

"Know what?" Lee asked. She stood on a kitchen chair cutting bunches of purple-blue grapes. Sunshine, slipping through the vines, brightened her soft brown hair. Shadow leaves printed her throat and arms. Clouds of white butterflies fluttered around her head. The air smelled of grapes and bonfire smoke, of the bone-meal that Jake was spreading over the dahlia beds.

"I know why you didn't go to New York." Aunt Harriet's bright blue eyes observed her closely. "It's none of my business, of course, but I think you're a foolish child."

"Why?" Lee asked slowly, dropping a bunch of grapes into the basket hanging on the arbor. She knew that Aunt Harriet knew. Nothing escaped her twinkling eyes. There was no use pretending. "Why?" she asked again.

"I suppose it gives you a fine feeling to sacrifice yourself for Rickey," Aunt Harriet said. "Well, you'd better enjoy it while you can. It's the only reward you're likely to get."

Lee flushed. "I don't want a reward," she said. "It isn't a sacrifice. I wanted to do it."

"Don't snap at me, child, I know it's none of

my business." Aunt Harriet's knitting needles flashed briskly through shell-pink wool. "But you can sing, Lee. It makes me cross to see you give up an opportunity to study with Madame Lucia."

"I haven't given it up." Lee stood on the chair pulling leaves from the vines. "She will take me next year. A year won't make much difference. It means everything to Rickey. He couldn't have got his degree."

"Fiddlesticks! If he wants to be a lawyer, he'll get there somehow. Judge Walton offered to give him a job in his office. He could have studied at night. There are many very fine lawyers who haven't a Harvard degree."

"But the degree will make it easier—"

"Easy!" Aunt Harriet sniffed. "Rickey has always got things too easily. It's his mother's fault. She thinks the world should be handed him on a silver tray. Not that he wouldn't say, 'Thank you.' He's as nice a boy as he's been allowed to be. You're almost as bad as she is. And there's less excuse. Eleanor is a goose. You're bright about most things. About everything but Rickey."

Lee remained silent. She *was* like Cousin Eleanor, she thought, where Rickey was concerned. It was because she loved him, too. You wanted to make things easy for people you loved. She did, at least. She was made that way. It was something she couldn't help.

Aunt Harriet probably knew how she felt about Rickey. She had a way of finding things out. Hadn't Aunt Harriet ever loved anybody? Or had she forgotten? Lee looked down at Aunt Harriet's bulky figure, at her waved white hair, at her plump hands holding the amber needles. It was dreadful to grow old, she thought, to forget the things that were important when you were young. She never wanted to forget. She wanted to treasure everything about Rickey, the heart-aches, the moments of happiness. Everything about Rickey.

"Of course it's none of my business," Aunt Harriet presently resumed. "But it makes me— Oh, what's the use of talking? You'll do as you please, I suppose. Drop me down a bunch of grapes. I like them warm from the sun."

Lee's written explanation did not satisfy Judy. She came for a week-end in October. Judy looked like a mischievous but thoroughly competent cherub. She had a small snub nose set in a round face covered with freckles and a fly-away mop of sandy hair. She was spunky and independent and had a mind and a will of her own. Lee loved Judy and Judy, though she scorned sentiment, was very fond of Lee.

"Let's have the low-down, darling," Judy said, looking up from her drawing-board at Lee the morning after she arrived. They sat in wicker chairs on the terrace. A table beside Judy held

water-color materials. On the paper thumb-tacked to the board a squirrel handed a cup of tea to a chipmunk across a toad-stool table beneath a feathery clump of ferns.

Lee had been watching Judy paint. She had been thinking, too, how Judy had improved. She was thinner than she used to be and very much more neat. She looked well in her dark gray suit with a green tie knotted under the collar of her blouse. At boarding-school she had been plump and round and always falling apart. She had lived four years in New York and she was two years older than Lee.

When Judy glanced up from the drawing-board, Lee lay back in her chair, looked up into the brilliant foliage of the trees above their heads.

"The bitter truth, darling." Judy's gray-green eyes fringed with sandy lashes had lost their merry twinkles. "Why didn't you come to New York?"

"I couldn't," Lee said slowly. "Cousin Eleanor lost some money—almost all that she had."

"And you gave her yours, I suppose." Judy's freckled face wore an exasperated expression.

"I couldn't do anything else." Lee avoided Judy's eyes. "They've always been so kind to me. I—"

"Rats!" Judy said scornfully.

"But Judy, don't you see—?"

"Perfectly," Judy said. "Charming Rickey had

to be sent back to Harvard. So you are the burnt offering."

"It isn't a sacrifice," Lee said indignantly. "I wanted to do it."

"Don't get sassy with me." Judy's indignant expression softened into a smile. "You needn't tell me: I know it's none of my business. But with your voice and your looks—" Her smile faded. "It seems a dreadful waste to squander them on Rickey."

"Why don't you like Rickey?"

"I like him well enough." Judy glanced at Lee, frowned at her remote air, bent her sandy head over the drawing-board. "Rickey is charming. But he's a spoiled little boy. I don't think he'll ever be anything else."

Lee murmured something. It sounded like a protest.

"I don't want to hurt you," Judy said quickly. "I know you've been in love with him since you were six years old. Don't try to pretend with me. I knew that in boarding-school. But I thought you'd got over it. You haven't, have you, Lee?"

"No," Lee said quietly.

"Then talking won't do any good." Judy washed in a blue sky, floating pink-edged clouds. "But I care so much about you. It makes me sick to see you waste yourself."

"You sound like Aunt Harriet," Lee said lightly, wanting to change the subject. "Please.

Judy, don't preach."

There was a moment of silence and Judy said, "Don't you want to sing?"

"Of course I do."

"You don't care enough," Judy said accusingly. "If Rickey should want you to marry him—"

Lee felt her heart beat quickly. "If," she said softly, wistfully.

"You'd do it," Judy continued. "You'd give up your music without winking an eyelash. You'd devote the rest of your life to spoiling Rickey. And Rickey would go on acting as though he were doing you a favor just to exist. You'd be his little halo. Oh, yes, Lee, you would."

Lee did not refute Judy's vigorous statement. She looked up through tinted foliage at the clear blue of the sky. Would she give up her music for Rickey? Judy wouldn't give up her painting for anything. She hadn't had an easy time. Her father was a clergyman. She had five younger brothers and sisters. The great-aunt who had sent Judy to boarding-school had washed her hands of her when she went to New York.

Nothing had daunted Judy. She had managed to live and to go to art school. She had worked very hard. Life was easier now. There was a growing demand for her illustrations. Lee wished that she were like Judy. She wished she could care so intensely about her music that nothing

else would matter. She knew that she couldn't. She would always have distracting thoughts of Rickey. Wasn't Judy ever distracted? She seemed so sure of herself.

"Don't you ever intend to marry?" she asked, turning to Judy.

"Certainly," Judy said confidently. "But I don't intend to marry somebody's spoiled little boy. I want a husband who will work and let me work and not expect me to be his little halo. There, it's finished." Judy propped the drawing-board against a jar on the table and squinted at it critically.

"It's splendid," Lee said.

"Is it? I don't know. I'm sick of pink-eared rabbits and whimsical snails. If I can ever save up enough money, I'm going somewhere and learn to paint. Gosh, the things I'd like to do!"

"You'll do them," Lee said. "I know you'll do them, Judy."

"Thank you." Judy shook her fly-away mop of hair. "You could, too." Her round face was serious. "Will you promise to come to New York next year in spite of everything? Will you promise me, Lee?"

"Cross my heart." Lee's finger moved to mark a cross on her blouse. Judy leaned forward and caught her hand.

"Don't," she said. "Here I am trying to be God. Do what you think will make you happy.

You're such a darling, Lee." Laughing, she left her chair. "I'm tired of giving improving lectures. Let's slide down the barn roof or something. Let's take a walk through the woods. Maybe we'll find some bittersweet. I'd like to take some back to the city."

John asked no questions.

"Isn't that great!" he said when she told him that she had changed her mind about going to New York. "Now you can make me some curtains."

She did make curtains for John's cabin on the hill. Together they visited auction-sales and second-hand shops for the furniture he needed. Lee felt that she had a part interest in the cabin. She spent many hours there, reading while John worked at his plans, sitting with him on the porch in the golden haze of Indian summer, cooking picnic meals in the kitchen or over the fireplace grill. She liked being with John. It kept her from feeling too lonely. She was glad that he was there.

Occasionally Lee wondered if he knew why she hadn't gone to New York. Judge Walton, his grandfather, must have suspected what she had done. He knew all about Cousin Eleanor's difficulties. But the Judge wouldn't have discussed the matter with anyone, except Aunt Harriet, perhaps.

If John knew, he didn't speak of it. Lee was grateful for that. John was a perfect companion. There was no repetition of the embarrassing moment when he had looked at her so strangely across the dusty goldenrod. She felt certain, as the autumn days passed, that she had been mistaken. John didn't care for her in more than a friendly way. He liked her. That was all.

She didn't neglect her music. She practiced faithfully every morning, except when Cousin Eleanor had a headache or Aunt Harriet wanted something from town or there were household tasks which had to be done. Mr. Reed, her music teacher in Philadelphia was helpful. He found a place for her in the choir of an Episcopalian church. It would be good practice, he said.

It was good practice, though going in to the city for rehearsals on Thursday evenings became tiresome when the novelty had worn off. It gave her a small income, too. The money was welcome. It was difficult to keep things going at Robin Hill. Eleanor had frenzied fits of economizing when they would have bread-pudding three days in succession or she would rip up a last year's frock, meaning to make it over by a pattern in *Vogue*.

But the impulse hadn't lasted long enough to complete the dress. "It would cost so much for new trimming," Eleanor would say, adding sums on her fingers. "And you never know how it will

turn out. It's really cheaper to buy something new." And they couldn't live on bread-pudding, of course. "Better pay grocery bills than doctor's bills," she would say when the expensive things she particularly liked appeared upon the table. "There's certainly no economy in buying cheap food."

Between the fits of economizing, life went on in much the usual way. Thalia found a place in West Grove. Only Jake and Susie were left. Eleanor remained placid. Since Rickey's last year at Harvard was assured, nothing else seemed to matter. She served tea to visitors who came to call, attended bridge parties, wrote long letters to Rickey. When the bills came in, she thrust them, unopened, into the drawer of her desk. For a time she would look worried. Then something would divert her, an invitation, a new hat, a brief letter from Rickey.

All of Rickey's letters were brief. Usually they were addressed to Eleanor. Occasionally he wrote to Lee. Her heart always beat quickly when she opened a letter from Rickey. She had, always, the feeling that it must contain something important. It was exciting just to see his writing on the envelope. Wings stirred in her heart. She could feel them lifting, fluttering in her throat.

The letters never contained anything important. He was well. The weather was fair or stormy. He had spent a week-end with the Mar

shalls. He was studying for examinations. His car was in the garage for repairs. That, usually, was all.

She watched the letters for references to Elaine. For a time he would not mention her. Then, just as she had begun to hope that Elaine was already a memory, a letter from Rickey would tell her that Elaine had been to Cambridge for a dance or a football game. Lee's spirits soared or dropped according to Rickey's letters. She knew it was silly to feel that way. But it was something she couldn't help.

There were letters from Judy, too. Reading them, Lee would regret, for a moment, that she hadn't gone to New York. It would be fun to live with Judy, to meet the people she knew. It would be fun to have dinners in odd little restaurants, to climb to the top balcony at the theater, to hear good music, to practice as long as she liked with Judy painting companionably near.

Perhaps Aunt Harriet was right, she would think, sitting on the terrace in the warm autumn sunshine with the pages of Judy's letter scattered across her lap. Perhaps she had been foolish. Perhaps what she had done was an extravagant gesture.

But she knew it was more than that. The moments of regret never troubled her long. Next year she would live with Judy. A year wouldn't matter to her. It meant everything to Rickey.

She wasn't unhappy, except when Rickey's letters mentioned Elaine. She loved Robin Hill in the autumn. The days passed quickly, pleasantly. Thanksgiving came and was gone.

"It's only two weeks until Christmas!" Lee said one evening to John. They had been to the movies in West Grove and were walking along the main street toward where they had parked the car. Main Street looked very festive. There were ropes of laurel and holly wreaths and strings of colored lights. The shop windows sparkled. The air was frosty and clear.

"You seem excited about it." John tucked her hand under his arm. "There, that's better," he said. "You'll go fizzing up through the air like a rocket if I don't hold you tight."

"I *am* excited." She looked up at him, her eyes shining, her cheeks nipped pink by the cold. She was so lovely, he thought, in her dark fur jacket with her hair curling out under a rose-colored cap. Little lovely Lee . . .

"Why?" he asked smiling, loving her look of happiness, loving the way she walked along beside him as though, at any minute, her feet would begin to dance. "Why?" he asked again.

Lee knew why she was excited. But she couldn't tell John.

"Oh, I love Christmas!" she said, pausing beside a shop window filled with toys. "I'm going to buy you a present." There were laughing notes

in her voice. Her eyes shone like candles lighted for Christmas eve. "Do you want the teddy-bear, John? Or the spotted clown? Or the lamb with the pink bow on its neck?"

"I want something else," John said. "I'm very hard to please."

"What?" she asked, smiling.

John looked down at her vivid face framed in curling soft brown hair. Why shouldn't he tell her what he wanted? He loved her very dearly. Why shouldn't he tell her now?

"Lee," he said softly. "Lee—"

A voice hailed them. A car stopped at the curb.

"There's Anne Carey!" Lee said, whirling around. "I didn't know she was home."

John watched her walk to the car, heard her gay greeting. He followed slowly, annoyed at the interruption. Had she guessed what he had meant to say? He thought that she looked relieved.

Chapter Fourteen: CHRISTMAS AT ROBIN HILL

RICKEY DID NOT come home for Christmas. A week before the holidays he wrote to tell Eleanor that he was going to Maine. The Marshalls were opening their camp at the lake. There was to be a house-party. Elaine would be one of the guests. He was sorry he wouldn't be at home. Could she send him a little extra money?

Eleanor read the letter aloud at the breakfast table. "I don't see quite how I'll manage that," she said when she had finished. "What do you think, Lee?"

Lee did not answer. She looked at the flowers on the table, pink carnations from the Careys' greenhouse mixed with a trailing vine, without seeing them. A lump gathered in her throat. She had been looking forward to Christmas. And Rickey was not coming home.

"Tell him it's impossible," Aunt Harriet advised over her toast and strawberry jam. "It's none of my business, of course, but with things as they are—"

"It may be his last good time." A worried frown creased Eleanor's brow. "He will be working next year."

"Let's hope so," Aunt Harriet said.

"I want him to be happy this year," Eleanor said softly, ignoring Aunt Harriet's remark. "I suppose I could return the watch I bought for him and send him the money instead."

Lee remained silent. Cousin Eleanor would manage, somehow, to send him the money, she thought, looking at the carnations with the sunlight slanting across them. She didn't care about Christmas now. Rickey was going to Maine. Elaine was going, too. The flowers became a bright, misty blur of pink and green.

Eleanor did manage. She went into the city

directly after breakfast. "I've sent Rickey the money," she said, coming into the music room late that afternoon. She looked tired but very happy. "I sent it by wire," she said.

Lee asked no questions. But she missed a sapphire and diamond ring Cousin Eleanor usually wore. She had sold it, perhaps, or pawned it to get the money for Rickey. She was sure she was right about the ring when she helped Cousin Eleanor pack a Christmas box for Rickey, for there was the watch in its slim leather case.

"I'd had his monogram engraved on it," Eleanor said, wrapping the case in Christmas paper. "So, of course, I couldn't return it. He does need a wrist watch. A pocket watch is often inconvenient."

Eleanor cried a little as they packed the box because Rickey was not coming home. But there was a smile behind the tears. "I want him to have a happy Christmas," she said. Her fingers touched the ribbon bows lovingly as though they were caressing Rickey.

"We won't bother much just for ourselves," Eleanor said when Rickey's box had been mailed. "We can't afford an expensive Christmas."

But she had to buy holly wreaths for all the windows because the man who came to sell them was out of work and had a large family of children. And a turkey, she explained, was really cheaper than chicken because there was more

meat on it. And they'd always had light and dark fruitcake and a variety of cookies to serve with home-made grape wine to people who came to call. She couldn't bear not to keep up the Christmas traditions of Robin Hill. She owed it to Richard's memory. They could do without something else.

Lee had thought that she wouldn't care about Christmas. But she found, surprisingly, that she did. She hung the holly wreaths in the windows and helped Susie to make cookies, small, fat ones bursting with citron and raisins and nuts, crisp ones cut into star and crescent shapes and sprinkled over with sugar. There were extra rehearsals for Christmas music at the church. There were net stockings to be filled with candy and nuts for Aunt Harriet's pet charity, the West Day Nursery. It was exciting to walk to the end of the drive and wait for fat Mr. Hipple, the mailman. Two days before Christmas he brought a mysterious package for Lee.

"Who sent it?" Eleanor asked, seeing the California postmark.

"I can't imagine!" Lee struggled with knotted cords.

"Do hurry!" Aunt Harriet urged, breathing heavily with excitement. "Have you a beau in Hollywood, Lee?"

The package contained an enormous box of bonbons and candied fruit. There was a card

tucked under the scarlet bow on the lid.

"Mr. Connell!" Lee said, surprised and pleased. She looked quickly at Eleanor, saw a bright pink flush stain her cheeks.

"Well! Well!" Aunt Harriet exclaimed. "You certainly made an impression."

Eleanor looked down at the scarlet satin bow on the tinted lid of the box.

"Did he— Is there a message?" she asked.

"*To wish you a Merry Christmas,*" Lee read aloud from the card. "*And to thank you again.*"

"That's nice of him," Eleanor said. "California— Is he— Do you suppose he is living there?"

"I don't think so. There's a Chicago address on the card. It *was* nice of him. Let's sample it," Lee said gaily, feeling sorry for Cousin Eleanor and wanting to help her somehow.

Eleanor ate a candied apricot with an expression of pleasure. Lee thought she had wasted her sympathy. Cousin Eleanor couldn't have cared for Mr. Connell. Perhaps, already, she had forgotten that dreadful dinner and the note she had written last summer.

But she knew that Cousin Eleanor hadn't forgotten when she found her, later in the day, reading the card that was tucked under the scarlet bow. Moving softly, Lee backed out of the living-room, coughed, and waited before she entered.

There was a Christmas package from Rickey.

His gift to Eleanor was a bed-jacket with fluffy ostrich trimming. Lee was bewildered when she opened the box marked with her name. It contained a gray angora shawl. Aunt Harriet's package explained the shawl.

"These can't be for me," she said, displaying two pairs of sheer lace stockings.

Eleanor, smiling mistily, looked up from the rose-colored jacket.

"He put the wrong cards on the boxes," she explained. "The shawl is for you, Aunt Harriet. The stockings are for Lee." She laughed indulgently. "Isn't that just like Rickey!"

It was like Rickey, Lee thought. He hadn't been thinking of them when he packed the box for Christmas. He had thought of the house-party in Maine, perhaps, thought of being there with Elaine. She looked at the sheer lace stockings lying limp in her lap. They were at least a size too large. Hadn't Rickey ever noticed that her feet were slender and small?

"I'm surprised it isn't a hot-water bottle!" Aunt Harriet eyed the shawl indignantly. "I'll give this to Susie. I haven't, thank Heaven, quite reached the shawl age yet."

Lee said nothing about the stockings. She folded them neatly in their box and hid them.

Robin Hill was gay on Christmas Eve. Candles burned in the windows under the holly wreaths. John came early in the evening to help Lee trim

the tree. Callers came and went. Jake, in a starched white coat, limped around with fruitcake and thimble-sized goblets of wine. Judge Walton, looking like a benevolent Santa Claus with his white hair and rosy cheeks, came to bring a hamper of fruit to Aunt Harriet. Mrs. Dowling, furred in mink, came with Trudy, furred in squirrel. The chauffeur, following them, was almost hidden behind long-stemmed red roses.

"Thank you," Eleanor said, her arms full of roses. "They're lovely. I do thank you so much."

"Don't mention it." Mrs. Dowling beamed. "We have loads. I think flowers are nice at Christmas. And they're so expensive if you haven't your own greenhouses." Her small, dark eyes darted around the living-room. "Oh, you have lots of flowers haven't you? I thought—"

"Our friends have been very kind," Eleanor said. "Will you take these, Jake?" She furtively rubbed her arm where thorns had pricked the skin. "Do take your coats off," she urged, hospitably. "It's cold, isn't it? I think it may snow before morning. Sit here by the fire."

"We can't stop a minute." Mrs. Dowling bounced down on the davenport. "Well, yes, for a minute, Trudy. Don't stop for us," she cried as Lee started to climb down from the stepladder. She turned to Trudy. "Unfasten your coat, pettie. You won't feel it when you go out."

Jake offered the fruitcake.

"Oh, no, I shouldn't, really!" Mrs. Dowling's plump, ringed hands flew up to ward off temptation. "But it does look delicious. Oh, well, just a little piece." She helped herself generously. "After all, it's Christmas. I don't think once in a while does any harm."

John handed Lee an ornament. Their eyes, brimming with laughter, met.

Lee laughed a great deal that evening. In a slim frock of cream-colored wool with scarlet slippers, for Christmas, and a scarlet ribbon binding her hair, she flew to the door to answer the bell, brought vases for the flowers, ran up and down the ladder sprinkling tinsel on the tree. John's eyes followed her. She looked, he thought, like a happy child. Little, lovely Lee. . . .

Now and then her laughter was stilled, when something reminded her of Rickey, when Jake, coming in with wood for the fire, announced that it was snowing. There would be snow in Maine, dark evergreens weighted with snow. Rickey was there with Elaine. She saw them walking through the silent woods, very close together, saw Rickey bending toward Elaine, saw Elaine's lifted face with snowflakes melting on her lashes. A bell broke in her hand.

"I have a present for you," John said, when the last of the callers had gone, when Eleanor and Aunt Harriet had said good night and he and Lee were alone.

"And you've kept it from me all evening!" Lee smiled her gayest smile.

"I don't like public presents." John, too, was gay. "I'm shy. Don't laugh. I am. It comes from being the grandson of a judge."

He left the room, returned presently with a large object wrapped in the robe from his car. It was a small chest, beautifully polished and carved. Her name—Shirley—was on the lid.

"It's lovely, John!" She looked up at him, her eyes shining softly. "Did you make it—for me?"

"Yes," he said, smiling at her pleasure in his gift. "From one of the apple trees Grandfather had cut down. You do like it, don't you, Lee?"

"Oh, yes." Looking down, she traced with her finger the letters that formed her name. John had made the chest for her. He had carved her name on the lid. It must have taken a very long time. She thought of the stockings Rickey had sent, a size and a half too large. Tears filled her eyes, rolled down over her cheeks.

"Lee!" John said. "You're crying, Lee."

"I'm not." Her chin quivered. "Yes, I am. I can't help it. It's so—so dear of you, John."

He caught her into his arms, kissed her lips, her hair, her wet, flushed cheeks. She drew away from him with a soft sound of protest.

"I love you, Lee." He tilted her chin, looked down into her eyes. "Don't look so startled, sweet. You know I've been wanting to kiss you

ever since—when did I see you first this summer? You had on a ruffy sort of dress the color of a tea-rose. It was just getting dark. Do you remember, Lee?"

"Please, John—" She turned her head. Holding her close he could see only the tumbled brown curls, the pink tip of her ear.

"There's a curl on your neck," he said. "It always escapes from the knot. I want to touch it every time I see you. Didn't you know that I love you? I thought girls could always tell."

"I wasn't sure," she said in a low voice. "I—I hoped you didn't."

A shadow slipped over John's face. The laughing look went out of his eyes.

"Because you don't love me?"

The curly head nodded, then lifted quickly. "I'm sorry," she said. Her eyes were wide and troubled. "I—I'm dreadfully sorry, John."

"Don't worry," he said gently. "Don't look so tragic, sweet. I'm not going out and shoot myself. I'm not even going out." He led her to the davenport, slipped a pillow under her head, walked to the window, and watched the snow.

Chapter Fifteen: RICKEY'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

SPRING CAME to Robin Hill. Daffodils bloomed in the garden. The pear tree beside the arbor looked like a bride's bouquet. Robins hopped

about the lawn, puffing out their plump red breasts, apparently feeling at home. The lilacs made lavender shadows against the white-coated walls of the house. The apple orchard was pink and white and showers of petals fell like snow when the branches swayed in the wind.

Lee knelt, one afternoon, beside the bed of lilies-of-the-valley beneath an oak tree near the veranda. She was thinning them out, digging busily with a trowel, placing the plants with their clumps of earth in a basket from the tool-house.

Jake was mowing the lawn. He sang as he worked, buzzing along like a giant bee above the clatter of the mower—

*"Nobody knows what troubles Ah've seen,
Nobody knows but Jesus..."*

Lee sang, too, happy because it was spring, because the lilies had grown so thickly. There would be enough to start a new bed, she thought, in the hollow under the hemlock hedge. She loved the lilies, the crisp pointed leaves, the delicate clusters of wax-white bells.

*"Nobody knows what troubles Ah've seen,
Glory hallelujah!"*

she sang, contentedly, half aloud.

Eleanor came out on the veranda, her pink cot-

ton dress blowing in the wind, her arms filled with catalogues. Jake stopped singing. Lee, watching, saw him exaggerate his limp, press his hand against his side.

That Jake! she thought, smiling. He always pretended to be at the point of death whenever Cousin Eleanor appeared. It was a trick to get out of work. But he did have a great deal to do. They couldn't afford extra help this year. Things were getting worse instead of better. They really couldn't afford even Susie and Jake.

Lee's eyes were troubled for a moment. Presently they brightened. Worries couldn't depress her today. The sunshine was warm, the sky was so blue, everything smelled so sweet.

"Glory hallelujah!"

she sang.

"I'm making a list for the garden," Eleanor said, spreading the catalogues on the table. She looked pleased, as she always did, when she thought she was being practical.

Lee continued to dig. Eleanor turned the pages of the catalogues, fascinated by bright red tomatoes and golden carrots and very green heads of lettuce. Jake sang again. The foliage of the oak tree rustled softly in the wind.

"Shall we try melons this year?" Eleanor called to Lee.

"Let's have pineapples," Lee suggested gaily, "and pomegranates and figs and tangerines."

"I don't think we'd better," Eleanor said quite seriously. "We can't risk anything fancy. Just beans and tomatoes and things."

"Beans!" Lee wrinkled her nose. "Can't we have pomegranates, Jake?" she asked as the mower circled the bed of lilies.

"No, ma'am!" Jake said emphatically. He stopped to rest, leaning over the handle of the mower. "We ain't goin' to have none of them little yappin' dogs around here. Dat Miss Dowlin', she got one. Name s Precious. Maida say—"

Lee laughed. Jake pushed back his hat and solemnly scratched his head.

"Not Pomeranians," Lee explained. "I said pomegranates, Jake."

"What s dat, Miss Lee?"

"It's fruit. They're very useful to poets. 'Her lips were as red as pomegranates. Don't you read poetry, Jake?"

"If you re talkin' about the garden," Jake said mournfully, "weeds is what we'll git. Weeds an' bugs an' beetles an' them pestiferous rabbits that eats up the lettuce plants."

"Jake, you have no soul." Lee smiled at the old Negro's gloomy expression. "Neither has Cousin Eleanor. Here I am planning a lovely garden and all you two can think of are weeds and beans. You are both a great disappointment.

I don't see how I stand you."

She sat back on the grass, pushed her hair from her eyes, leaving a smudge of dirt on her forehead. Smiling, she sang,

*"I'll plant a little garden
Full of figs and tangarines.
I won't have any cabbages,
I won't have any beans."*

A car raced up the drive under the leafing maples. The singing stopped on a breathless note. Lee's eyes widened. Dropping the trowel, she scrambled to her feet.

"It's Rickey!" she cried.

"Rickey?" Eleanor rose, tilting the table, sending the catalogues spilling down to the floor. Jake moved off, pushing the mower languidly. Eleanor came to stand under the oak tree with Lee.

Rickey saw them and waved. The car came to a sudden stop, sending up jets of gravel. Rickey walked toward them across the lawn.

"Hello!" he called, waving his hat. Sunshine brightened his rumpled blond hair. There was about him the air of gaiety and excitement that always came with Rickey.

"Why didn't you let us know you were coming?" Eleanor asked. A little frown creased her brow. There was nothing but left-overs for din-

ner, she thought. Well, Susie could make an omelet.

"I wanted to surprise you." Rickey seemed unusually gay. There was a flush on his cheeks. His eyes were very bright. He kissed Eleanor and turned to Lee. "There isn't a clean place to kiss," he said, laughing. "What have you been doing?"

"Grubbing," she said, wondering why Rickey's eyes were so bright.

They went up onto the veranda. Rickey dropped into a chair, stretched out his tweed-covered legs.

"Do you want something to drink?" Eleanor hovered about the chair. "Or something to eat? How long have you been driving? Lee, would you mind—?"

"Don't fuss, Mother," Rickey said. He lit a cigarette. Lee saw that his hands trembled a little. "I want to tell you something."

Eleanor looked startled. Her hand crept up to her throat.

"It's nothing tragic," Rickey said. "It's really amazing good luck. Sit down and compose your features. You'll have wrinkles if you worry."

Eleanor sat on the edge of a chair close to Rickey's. Lee moved toward the door into the house.

"Where are you going?" Rickey asked.

"I thought, perhaps—"

"Come here." Rickey smiled. "I may need

your help. Don't run away, Lee dear."

She came to sit on the footrest of his chair, looked up at him quietly, waiting for him to speak.

"I tried all the way down to think up some way to break the news. It's no use. I'll just have to tell you. I've left college," he said.

"Oh, Rickey, why?" The pink faded from Eleanor's cheeks. Lee sat very still, almost holding her breath.

"I'm working," Rickey said. "I have a job in a brokerage office in New York. Jim Grant got it for me. It's a very swell office, too. I was lucky to have the chance."

"But why couldn't you have waited?" Eleanor's eyes filled with tears. "Only two more months—"

"I couldn't wait. If I hadn't grabbed it, they'd have given the job to somebody else."

"But Rickey, darling—"

Rickey's jaunty air dropped away. He looked directly at Eleanor.

"I'm sorry if you're disappointed," he said. "But please be reasonable about it. I've never wanted to be a lawyer, especially. I don't think I was ever consulted. I've thought it all over. It would take me years to get anywhere. I think I'll like selling bonds. I can be charming to nice old ladies. There's money in it, too. Jim Grant made a wad last year."

"But things are so unsettled now." Eleanor's voice trembled. "Business, I mean. And stocks aren't pay—" She paused, looked confused, continued hurriedly, "I mean it doesn't seem a very good time to— Judge Walton says—"

"There are always calamity howlers," Rickey said lightly. "I've made a sale already." His manner became slightly swaggering. "Good Lord! It isn't the end of the world. I should think you'd be glad." He smiled his quick, friendly smile. "No more garage bills, no more tailors to pay. I'm not a child any more. I know what I want to do."

"But Rickey, you don't know—"

Lee looked at Eleanor warningly.

"It's Rickey's life," she said slowly. "If he wants to—"

"That's the girl!" Rickey interrupted. His eyes thanked her. His hand touched her hair. "I knew you would understand," he said softly. "You always do. You're my good angel, Lee."

She flushed and looked down. Dark lashes shadowed her eyes. She didn't regret her wasted generosity. The money seemed unimportant. If this was what Rickey wanted to do— If this was the best thing for Rickey—

"I must make a lot of money," Rickey said, after a moment of silence. And then, abruptly, he added, "I'm going to marry Elaine."

Lee felt as though she were falling. Her hands

clutched the footrest of the chair. Rickey's casual words echoed, re-echoed through her head. *I'm going to marry Elaine.* There was a buzzing sound in her ears. Through it she heard, faintly, Cousin Eleanor's soft little cry and Rickey saying something about Elaine.

Suddenly she was angry, furiously angry at Elaine. It was Elaine's fault that Rickey had left college. It wasn't something he wanted to do. He was doing it for Elaine. She felt herself tremble with rage. Elaine shouldn't do this to Rickey. The buzzing sound in her ears was like the swarming of angry bees.

"You'll be a bridesmaid, won't you, Lee?" Rickey's voice sounded light and airy. "You'll look awfully sweet in a floppy hat. You will, won't you, Lee?"

Lee sprang to her feet. Angry words were on her lips. She knew that she must not speak them. If she stayed she would, if she stayed there on the veranda with Rickey and Cousin Eleanor. She wasn't unhappy, just then. She didn't feel desolate because Rickey was going to marry Elaine. All other emotions were lost in fury. She walked rapidly to the door.

"Lee!" Rickey called. "What's the matter, Lee? Why are you running away?"

She steadied her voice.

"I forgot something I should have remembered," she said and went in and closed the door.

Chapter Sixteen: LEE WALKS ALONE—

LEE PUSHED her way through the woods beyond Robin Hill. The sunset was fading. A still, green dusk filled the woods. The blossoms of the dogwood glimmered, ghostly white, through the shadows and birds made small, soft chirping sounds. There was a chill in the air.

Walking blindly, she scarcely knew when she left the path. She had no destination. She had wanted only to escape, to walk until her anger had cooled. She couldn't go back for dinner feeling so furious, back to hear Rickey making wedding plans, to see the light in his eyes when he spoke of Elaine.

Elaine! She saw her, her silky dark hair, her odd, dark eyes, her vivid scarlet lips. She wanted Rickey to make a lot of money. That was why he had left college. He wouldn't have thought of it of his own accord. He had wanted to get his degree from Harvard. He had wanted to be a lawyer.

They had had make-believe trials when they were children. She remembered Rickey pleading the case of a cat that had killed a bird. That was after Grandfather had taken him to the courthouse in West Grove. If he hadn't been consulted about a profession, it was because everyone, and Rickey himself, had taken it for granted that he

would be a lawyer.

He would regret sometime, perhaps, that he hadn't finished at law school. Then it would be too late. She thought of writing to Elaine, of going to see her in New York. If she loved him, she would want to do what was best for Rickey. Did she love him? Lee knew so little of Elaine—only surface things, her dark, exciting beauty, her low, cool voice, the exquisite clothes that she wore.

Elaine! Lee pushed through underbrush, through tangles of twisted vines. A branch whipped across her face. She was only vaguely conscious of the hurt. She saw Elaine in the white dress she had worn to the Country Club dance, the silver white dress like moonlight, the scarlet slippers, the sheen of her silky dark hair. Why had Rickey let her influence him? Was Rickey weak? Hadn't he the fine qualities that she'd thought he had, the things that made him worth loving? Was Rickey as weak as he was charming? Was he only a spoiled little boy?

She knew the answer to that. Rickey loved Elaine. You were willing to make any sacrifice for someone you really loved. She knew that. She would do anything for Rickey. It was strange to think that Rickey felt for Elaine the same emotion that she felt for Rickey. She'd always thought of people loving Rickey.

Love wasn't a gentle thing. It made you so

helpless. You could be so dreadfully hurt. She didn't want Rickey to be hurt. He had been so confident, this afternoon, telling them of the sale he had made. He had swaggered a little, like a boy pretending to be grown-up. She didn't want him to lose his confidence. Elaine shouldn't do that to Rickey. She would prevent it, somehow, if she could. Rickey must not be hurt.

But perhaps Elaine loved Rickey, perhaps he needn't be hurt. How could she help loving him? Perhaps Rickey would be successful in New York and make a great deal of money. He would enjoy it so. There was no one more lordly and lavish than Rickey.

Perhaps Elaine wouldn't mind if he didn't make a great deal of money. Perhaps she would be happy with Rickey in a small apartment somewhere. It wasn't easy to picture Elaine in an apron getting breakfast for Rickey. But it was possible, of course. Perhaps Elaine loved Rickey enough for that, enough for anything.

Lee hoped that Elaine loved Rickey. Did she? She wasn't sure. She wanted Rickey to be happy. But the thought of him happy with Elaine was harder to bear than the thought that he might be hurt. That was dreadfully selfish. If Rickey was hurt and unhappy, he might need her; there might be something she could do. If he was happy with Elaine, she would lose him forever. It *was* dreadfully selfish. But she couldn't help it.

Rickey called her his "good angel." She wasn't an angel. She was only a very human girl who loved him with all her heart.

Tears filled her eyes, streamed down over her face. Stumbling blindly, she tripped on a root, lay where she had fallen, buried her face in her folded arms. She wasn't angry now. She had stopped hating Elaine. There was only one emotion left and that was her love for Rickey. She lay there sobbing, pressing her face in her arms.

Presently the sobbing grew less. Feeling relieved, she sat up. She could go home now. If only she wouldn't cry again— She didn't want Rickey to know. *Dear God, she prayed fervently, please don't ever let Rickey know. Please, please don't let me cry.*

But it wasn't easy to go back home. The green dusk had deepened. There was no path through the crowding trees. She wandered at random, pushing this way and that, trying to find a trail.

Was she lost? She shook off a feeling of panic. It was absurd to be lost so close to home. Robin Hill was below her somewhere. Was she walking uphill or down? It was difficult to be certain. The darkness was so dense; the underbrush grew so thickly. If she could see a light—

She did see a light, shining dimly through the trees. She followed it and came out into clearing around the cabin. The door was open. John stood there with Eric, his great Dane, dark sil-

houettes against the rectangle of light. Lee felt relieved and a little foolish. It was silly of her to have thought that she was lost.

"Down, Eric!" she cried as the dog bounded towards her.

"Lee?" John called. He came to her. "What are you doing here?"

"I thought I was lost," she said, laughing shakily.

"Lost?" John smiled. "Why, you're trembling."

"Am I? I was a little scared. I couldn't see a light. Only the stars. And they are so far away."

"Are you hurt?"

"No, I'm not hurt. It was silly."

"Here, come on in. First thing you'll get lost again right on my doorstep."

Chapter Seventeen: —AND MAKES A WISH

LEE SAT in a deep chair beside the cabin hearth. John had lit the kerosene lamps. They made a dim light in the long, rough-walled room. Eric, the great Dane, lay on a rug before the fire, looking up at her with liquid amber eyes. Sweet night air came in through the open windows.

Lee relaxed, feeling warm and contented. The pain would return in time, the hurt of losing Rickey. But, for the moment, she was at peace. She had washed her face and brushed her hair.

The firelight colored her cheeks. Its warmth made her drowsy. Her hands stopped twisting, slipped apart, lay loosely in her lap. Her eyelids drooped. Her lashes curved down on her cheeks.

"You must drink every drop of this," John said, coming out from the kitchen.

Her lashes lifted. "What is it?" she asked.

"Eggnog," he said, smiling. "It's made by a secret formula. In the dark of the moon."

"It's wonderful." She drank thirstily, looking up at him, like a child, over the rim of the glass.

"Do you feel better?" he asked, taking the glass she had emptied.

"Much better, thank you." She smiled. "Warm and drowsy. I ought to go home."

"Not yet." John came to sit on a low stool beside her chair. "Why were you wandering in the woods? Haven't you any sense at all? Why were you, Lee?"

"I was running away."

"From what?"

"From something that made me unhappy." She stirred in the chair. "But I couldn't run far enough. It can't be done, can it, John?"

"Do you want to tell me about it? It helps, sometimes, to talk."

"I—" She stopped and caught her breath. John looked up at her, saw that she was trying not to cry.

"Don't, if it makes you unhappy," he said.

"You are unhappy, aren't you?"

She nodded. Her hands twisted together. John caught them, held them tightly.

"Why won't you marry me?" he asked. "Why won't you let me take care of you?"

She gave a cry of distress.

"Let me talk about it," he said. "You always stop me. I know it's because you don't want to hurt my feelings. Don't you understand how I feel about you? I love you, I want you, but I'm not going to be tragic. Perhaps that isn't flattering. Perhaps you'd like it better if I talked about guns and cups of hemlock."

"Oh, no, John," she said, half laughing.

"I'll probably live to a cranky old age if you don't marry me. I don't even say that I won't give you up. That's something I can't control. But I love you very dearly. Why won't you marry me?"

Lee did not answer. She sat very still in the deep chair, looking into the fire.

"I may never be a brilliant success," John continued. "I may never have very much money. But I care about you. I think I could make you happy."

"Happy—" she repeated as though it were an unfamiliar word.

"You aren't happy. I've watched you. There's sadness under the shine in your eyes. Your lips, when you smile, are wistful. It's charming. It

makes you lovely-looking. But I don't think it's good for you. Run away from unhappiness with me. Now, I mean. Tomorrow, tonight. We'll live on a boat this summer. We'll follow the sun. Will you run away with me, Lee?"

"I—I can't," she said so low that the words were dim ghosts of sound. "John, I can't."

"You needn't give up your music." His voice was low and caressing. His dark eyes were grave. "You can go to New York in the fall. I'll go with you, or you can go alone. I want you to belong to me, but I wouldn't interfere with you. I can get a job in New York. I'll see that you gargle properly and wear rubbers when it rains." He looked up at her, tenderness in his grave, dark eyes, a smile curving his lips. "It might not be a hardship to have me always around." His face brightened. "You're weakening," he said. "I can see it in your eyes. Will you let me take care of you, Lee?"

"It's your voice," she said. "It's lovely, John. You mustn't say beautiful things. I might run away with you tonight, because I am unhappy, because it would be sweet to have you take care of me. That wouldn't be fair to you. I love you—but not that way."

"How do you know?" he asked.

She did know. John didn't arouse the emotions that Rickey did. She hadn't, with him, the feeling of walking among the stars, of swooping down

in a swing.

"I do know," she said.

"You love someone—differently?"

"Yes," she said, turning to look at the fire.

"It's Rickey, isn't it, Lee?"

"Yes," she said again.

"Then," John said slowly, "that, as we say, is that."

"But if you love me, John," she asked, "how can you—?" She hesitated and flushed.

"How can I be calm about it? Is that what you mean?"

She nodded. Pink stained her face and throat.

"There," he said lightly, teasingly. "I told you I wasn't being romantic enough. You'd like it better—wouldn't you?—if I grew hollow of eye and gaunt of cheek, if I raved and tore my hair. . . . I'm teasing, Lee. Don't look so hurt."

"I want to know," she said earnestly. "Please tell me, John."

"It comes with age."

"Age!"

"I'm twenty-eight. Don't laugh at your elders, young lady." His voice lost its light, teasing tone. "It does come with age," he said. "You learn not to cry for the moon."

"Do you?" she asked. He saw that her lips were trembling. "Do you really, John?"

"Yes," he said. "But learning that is a dreary task. I wish I could do it for you. You're so

small, so very dear. I wish I could bear all of your unhappiness. I would, gladly, if it were possible. They aren't just words. I mean it. I do mean it, Lee."

She freed her hand, touched his hair, smoothed the dark arrow that grew down on his brow. "I wish—"

"I wish you could." He caught her hand, kissed the palm, kissed the tip of each finger. "I wasn't being quite truthful a moment ago. I haven't learned not to cry for the moon. You're my moon, Lee, a slim little crescent moon, very bright, very far away."

They were silent for an interval. Outside the cabin the wind in the trees made a sound like gentle waves. A log broke in the fireplace, sending up a shower of sparks. Eric moved, thumped his tail on the floor. Lee sighed.

"You're awfully tired, aren't you?" John asked. "Getting lost in the woods was bad enough. Now I've talked you half to death. Let me take you home. You ought to be in bed."

"I *am* tired." Her head drooped back against the chair. Her eyes moved slowly around the room. She saw the curtains she had made for John, the bright rugs, the firelight playing across the rough brown walls, the dog asleep on the hearth. It was pleasant here. She felt peaceful and contented. Why shouldn't she let John take care of her? Rickey was going to marry Elaine. . . .

"What are you thinking?" John asked, looking up at her from the stool beside her chair.

She looked down at John, saw the tenderness in his dark eyes. Life with John wouldn't be dull. He amused her, she liked to talk to him. He wouldn't be exacting. But she had given her heart to Rickey. Long ago, when she was a shy little girl and Rickey was a handsome boy with rumpled, bright blond hair, she had given him her heart, her loyalty, all of her glowing young dreams. She had so little left for John. It wouldn't be fair. She couldn't do that to John.

"I wish—" she said softly, touching his hair.

He held her hand against his cheek. He knew, though she did not complete the thought, what she had meant to say.

"I know," he said. "Lee, dear, I wish you could."

Chapter Eighteen: LEE IS NOT HAPPY

"TELL ME about her," Judy said. She sat on the curbing of the fountain, her knees crossed, a sandaled foot idly swinging.

"The roses are worse than ever this year." Lee held up a pale pink blossom. "It's simply swarming with beetles."

"Don't try to change the subject," Judy said severely. "I'm not interested in beetles. I want to know more about Rickey's Elaine."

"What?" Lee asked. She came to sit on the grass at Judy's feet, leaned back against the pool curbing.

"Does she look like Tennyson's lily maid?"

"No, not at all. She's dark. Her skin is the color of dark honey."

"That's too bad." Judy sighed loudly. "It puts me to a great deal of trouble. When you wrote me that her name was Elaine, I painted myself a mental picture of a blonde. Now I'll have to paint another. This hot weather, too!"

"She's beautiful," Lee said.

"Rats!" Judy said emphatically. "I'll bet she isn't as good-looking as you are."

"Oh, yes she is. She has tilted dark eyes and silky black hair and long, graceful legs."

"You're too modest, darling. It's a virtue that can be overdone. Do you ever look at yourself?"

"Often. I look like a girl on a magazine cover. The June number, with decorations of roses. Elaine has distinction."

"I'll take your word for it. Let it pass." Judy gestured airily. "When are they going to be married?"

"I don't know." Lee pulled the petals from the rose, slowly, one by one. "Rickey is just getting started in business. Elaine's family hasn't anything. The engagement hasn't been announced. Cousin Eleanor wanted to do it here, but Elaine asked her to wait."

"Hmmm—!" Judy murmured.

"It isn't that. They—they're awfully happy. They spent last week-end here. Elaine seemed—softer. She seemed to glow. She's more beautiful than ever."

"And you're all eyes. You're as thin as a shadow. I could cheerfully choke him!" Judy burst out.

"It isn't Rickey's fault. It's something I did myself. It started when we were children. My parents died. I wanted someone to love. And Rickey was so magnificent. I gave all my love to him. He didn't ask for it. It isn't his fault."

"I could shake you!" Judy said.

"It wouldn't do any good." Lee's lips trembled. "Nothing does, for long. I've tried, Judy. Really I have. I'm much better. I can sleep now. I couldn't at first. I'll get over it after a while."

Judy's face softened. Her scolding voice was gentle.

"I'm sorry," she said. "Don't think I'm heartless, Lee. But it does make me so mad!"

"I want Rickey to be happy," Lee said slowly. "If he's happy with Elaine, I—I'll try to be cheerful about it."

"And if he isn't?"

Lee lifted her chin. Faint color came into her cheeks.

"Then something is going to happen," she said.

"Whew!" The exclamation was a whistling

sound of surprise. "The good old fighting spirit! But go ahead. Raise all the roofs you like. Do anything, but don't be resigned. I haven't liked that dying lily expression in your eyes."

"I'm not a dying lily. I'm going to New York and live with you and work as hard as I can."

"That's the girl!"

"I won't have very much money. Grandmother Bell's legacy was less than I thought. The securities she left me aren't worth half what they were when she died. You're getting so prosperous. I'm afraid I can't support myself in the style to which you are accustomed."

"We'll get along." Judy gave Lee's shoulder an approving pat. "You can turn all this to good account. Don't you remember what Madame Lucia said: 'You must suffer before you can sing.'"

"Maybe. I don't know. Anyway, I'll try."

"Aren't you excited?" Judy asked.

"Sometimes." Lee sifted the rose petals through her fingers, let them fall to the grass. "But sometimes—I don't know."

"You've said that twice in exactly half a minute. What don't you know?"

"I don't know anything."

"Such touching humility!"

"Oh, Judy!" Lee's voice broke on a sob. "I—I'm so unhappy."

Judy dropped down on the grass, drew Lee's

head against her shoulder and pushed the brown curls back from her brow.

"I thought I was over this crying."

"Go on and cry. There's no one to see you except a dragon-fly on a lily pad. He looks like a gentleman. Cry as much as you like."

"Nothing seems any use," Lee said, sobbing.

"I could shake you! Oh, Lee, dear. I'm so sorry!"

Chapter Nineteen: ELAINE IS NOT HAPPY

"THE LOVE-BIRDS aren't cooing today." Aunt Harriet, rocking on the veranda, glanced off across the lawn to the chairs under an oak tree where Rickey sat with Elaine.

Lee glanced up from the book she was reading. Her eyes followed Aunt Harriet's across the sun-dappled lawn. Elaine lay back in a canvas chair, looking up into the branches of the tree. Rickey was smoking, blowing rings into the air. They appeared to be unconscious of each other, as though a greater distance divided them than the space between the chairs.

"Rickey's as thin as a rail," Aunt Harriet continued. "That girl has a washed-out look. They're either as silent as ghosts or as fidgety as gadflies. Young people have no sense of proportion."

"It's hot in the city," Lee said. "Rickey isn't accustomed to working in the summer."

"Work never hurt anybody," Aunt Harriet observed. "They look to me as though something is worrying them."

Lee, silently, agreed with Aunt Harriet. Something surely must have happened. A month ago, when Rickey and Elaine had spent a week-end at Robin Hill, they had seemed so happy. There had been a glow in Elaine's dark eyes. Rickey had seemed happy, too, gay and teasing and tender, vibrantly alive. "Ah done see younguns in love befo'," Jake had said. "But dem two dere!" He had gestured toward the garden where Rickey was heaping Elaine's bare arms with pink and golden poppies. "Dey all bust out wid it same as if it was de measles."

It hadn't been easy to see them happy together. They were always laughing. "What's the joke?" Cousin Eleanor would ask. They couldn't tell her. "Nothing," Rickey would say, or Elaine, perhaps, and then they would laugh again. Cousin Eleanor would look hurt. But Lee knew that it was being happy that made them laugh, just being in love and together.

No, it hadn't been easy. Often, during that week-end, she had slipped away into the woods because she couldn't bear to see them together. But she had been certain that they were deeply in love. That helped her. She couldn't rejoice, exactly. But she could be glad for Rickey. She wanted him to be happy. If he were, then it

would be easier for her to become reconciled.

This week-end it wasn't the same. Elaine's eyes were shadowed. The lighted look was gone. Rickey looked tired. They seemed to be under a strain. It was something Elaine had done. Lee thought she had stopped being angry at Elaine. But she hadn't. She felt it now as she looked across the lawn, patterned with sunlight and shadows, at Rickey and Elaine.

Rickey was unhappy. His eyes, when he looked at Elaine, had a pleading expression. He seemed always to be trying to bring her back to him from her still, far-away dreams. They didn't laugh any more in the way they had. Elaine was hurting Rickey.

Lee felt a pain in her heart. It hurt her to see that pleading expression in Rickey's eyes. He had been so sure of himself, so confident that he could have what he wanted from life. He didn't know how to endure unhappiness. His life had been easy, effortless. She looked again at his blond head against the faded green of the chair. Oh, how she hated Elaine!

But the feeling vanished completely. Late that afternoon she found Elaine on the low terrace of the garden. She had gone to cut flowers for the table and there was Elaine sitting alone on the grass near the bed where the poppies grew. Her head was bent, her fingers touched the crumpled silk petals of the poppies in her lap.

"Hello," Lee called. She wanted Elaine to know she was there. She felt as though she were spying, as though she were finding out something that Elaine wouldn't want her to know.

Elaine raised her head. Her lips smiled but her dark eyes were shadowed.

"Did you ever see so many weeds?" Lee moved briskly among the flowers. "I don't see how the flowers can bloom," she said, snipping spikes of larkspur, bronze and pink snapdragons, sprays of trailing green. "The garden used to be lovely. It's almost a wilderness now."

"You can't go back, can you, Lee?"

Lee looked at Elaine, a question in her eyes.

"The poppies are still blooming," Elaine said softly. She seemed not to know that Lee was there. "It's been so short a time. I thought if I could see them again—"

Lee thought of Rickev heaping Elaine's bare arms with pink and golden poppies. She thought of Jake's remark, "Dey all bust out wid it same as if it was the measles." So short a time. Only a month ago. . . .

"What is it? What's the matter?" Lee dropped down on the grass beside Elaine. She didn't hate her now. Elaine looked so troubled. It was dreadful to be unhappy. She couldn't hate Elaine.

"Nothing. Everything." Elaine touched, caressingly, the flowers in her lap. "I've been trying to go back. You can't, can you, Lee?"

What meaning lay behind the words? Lee sat very breathless and still.

"Nothing stays the same." There was sadness in Elaine's low voice. "Things that are perfect last only a moment. If they lasted, they wouldn't be perfect. We'd spoil them. We'd do or say the wrong thing. I wish I had died a month ago."

"Elaine! What is it? Is there something—?"

"You're a sweet thing." Elaine laughed, a low laugh, quickly stilled. "Rickey said you were. There's nothing the matter, really." Her dark eyes were laughing now. "I'm dramatizing myself. I thought it might be interesting to be pensive in a garden. It isn't." She rose lightly. "All I've got out of it is a grass stain on my dress."

What did Elaine really mean? Lee wondered as they walked back to the house. She hadn't been merely acting. Lee was sure of that. Her dark eyes had been troubled. "I wish I had died a month ago." What lay behind the words? She hadn't said them as though she were acting. She had been dreadfully in earnest.

What did Elaine really mean? Lee wondered all through supper, out of doors under the linden tree. Elaine was gay at supper. In a sheer frock of pale yellow net with touches of scarlet to match her slippers, she talked lightly, amusingly, charming even Aunt Harriet into grudging admiration. Rickey, too, was gay. They laughed, were silent, and laughed again. But the laughter wasn't the

same, Lee thought. It was a shade *too* gay. It sounded forced. They weren't really happy.

Lee couldn't forget the moment in the garden when Elaine had looked up from the poppies and said, "I wish I had died a month ago." She thought of it as she rode with John, that evening, out to see the farmhouse he had done over for the young Rodney Franklins. She followed John through the rooms of the low-roofed house, admiring things, making appropriate comments. But her thoughts were with Rickey and Elaine. Why were they unhappy? Where would it end? What were they going to do?

John noticed her abstraction.

"You aren't really seeing it," he said. He sounded irritated. "Your thoughts are miles away."

"Oh, yes, I am. It's beautiful, John." She forced her thoughts back to the low-roofed farmhouse that John had made so lovely. "I'm very proud of you."

"Are you?" he asked. They sat on a bench built around a pear tree near the house. Twilight was deepening into night. Fireflies twinkled and darkened, darkened and twinkled in the tall, weed-grown grass.

"Yes," she said softly. "I am. I'm very proud of you, John."

He told her, then, of the things he would like to do. Houses, he said, should be simple and

charming. He wanted to design them, to express in stone and shingles, in brick and wood his love for simple, beautiful things. Lee's thoughts wandered back to the garden at Robin Hill. Through John's voice she heard Elaine's "I wish I had died a month ago." She could never hate Elaine again. She was unhappy, too. Wasn't anyone ever happy?

"You aren't listening," John said. "You haven't heard a word of my lecture on American Homes of the Future." He bent toward her. "I'm not getting any better," he said. "I'm not getting over you at all."

"Aren't you, John?"

"Not at all," he repeated. "Couldn't you—Haven't you changed your mind?"

She shook her head.

"I did this house for you. I saw you in it everywhere. 'Lee would like this. 'Lee wouldn't like that.' I can't keep you out of my work. I can't keep you out of my thoughts. That little curl on your neck. Your small, firm hands. The way your lashes curl. I'm as romantic as a schoolboy. That's what you've done to me. Aren't you ashamed of yourself?"

"I—I'm sorry." Her voice trembled.

She *was* sorry. She liked John so much. Why must she keep thinking of Rickey? He loved Elaine. There was nothing she could do for them. John loved her very dearly. It would be sweet to

have him take care of her.

"I can't." Her hand touched his frankly, comradely. "It wouldn't be fair. I—I like you too much."

"Forgive me," John said gently. "I try not to bother you, Lee. I don't very often, do I? I go for weeks without telling you that I love you. I didn't mean to tell you tonight. It's the honeysuckle, I think. And that little curl on your neck." He rose, took her hands, drew her up from the bench. "Come. We'll go back home."

What did Elaine really mean? Lee continued to wonder as she brushed her hair very much later that night. Why was she unhappy? Did Elaine want more than Rickey could give? She had seemed so happy a month ago. Had she stopped loving Rickey?

Ready for bed, she sat on the window-seat, hugging her knees in her arms. Would she always feel like this? Would there always be this aching lump in her throat? Not when she went to New York. Elaine and Rickey would be there. She could forget that, perhaps. Living with Judy would be fun. She would work as hard as she could.

"God has put a lark in your throat. It's a wonderful gift, my dear." Dear Grandfather! She saw him, his ruddy complexion, his bright blue eyes, his polished, square-toed boots. She wished she might creep into the shelter of Grandfather's arms. He had been so kind. She had loved him so.

"God has put a lark in your throat." Grandfather's words had comforted her a very long time ago. Remembering them helped her now. She would study, she would learn to sing, she would work as hard as she could. Judy would help her. John would help. She needn't feel lost and forlorn. Presently she began thinking of Rickey and Elaine.

And then she saw them. They walked slowly, very close together, up from the garden, across the moonlit lawn. Sitting very still on the window-seat, almost holding her breath, Lee watched them. Had they made up their quarrel, whatever it was? Were they happy again?

She thought they were. They paused under the elm tree that brushed her screen, so close that she heard the low murmur of their voices. Through a film of tears she saw them draw together, shadowy figures beneath the foliage of the trees, saw them cling to each other as though they might suddenly be parted, as though this moment under the elm trees, under the summer stars, was the end of the world.

Lee left the window-seat, crept into bed, and buried her face in the pillow.

Chapter Twenty: THE PENFIELDS FACE THE FACTS

"SOMETHING will have to be done." Eleanor looked up from the papers that littered her desk

with a distracted expression. "We simply can't go on this way. Look at this."

Lee took the letter and read it through. A frown puckered her brow.

"I must say I don't think it's very courteous. Considering the number of years we've dealt with Mr. Porter—"

"It isn't discourteous. He wants his money, that's all. The bill has been running a year and a half. He hasn't been paid anything on account since the fifteenth of last May."

"That must be a mistake. I'm sure I sent him a check in—let me see—" Eleanor considered, her lower lip caught in her teeth. "In June I think. Just before your birthday. Or was that the coal dealer? Well, it ought to be in here." She turned through the stubs in her checkbook. "There!" she said triumphantly. "The twenty-fourth of June!"

Lee looked over Eleanor's shoulder.

"But that's June of last year. At least, I suppose you meant 1929. It's dated 1919."

"I certainly thought—" Eleanor looked ready to cry. "Lee, what are we going to do?"

"Are there any more bills?" Lee asked.

"All these." Eleanor pulled open a drawer. Envelopes spilled out on the desk and overflowed to the floor.

"Good Heavens! They haven't even been opened!"

"What was the use?" Eleanor looked helpless

and appealing. "I couldn't pay them. It would simply have meant distressing myself for nothing."

"But Cousin Eleanor—" Lee said sharply.

"Goodness knows I do the best I can." Eleanor's eyes filled with tears. "I never had to consider money before Richard died. He did everything for me. I—"

"I know." Lee's voice softened. "But that won't help us now. This house is too large, Cousin Eleanor. It's too expensive to keep it up. Why couldn't you—"

"Sell Robin Hill?" Eleanor's eyes were tragic. "Oh, Lee, I couldn't. I simply couldn't do that."

"Of course you couldn't." Lee knew exactly how she felt. "I didn't mean that. But couldn't you and Aunt Harriet live in the gardener's cottage? Just this winter, of course. I've been thinking about it. I can't see why not. It has a good furnace and a bathroom. I think you'd be very cozy there."

"The gardener's cottage!" Eleanor was amazed. "Are you crazy? What would people say?"

"I don't think that matters especially." Lee's chin wore a firm expression. "It won't cost nearly as much to heat the cottage. And it's so small that you can let Jake and Susie go and take care of it yourselves."

"Do our own work? Do everything?"

"You can get Clarence for almost nothing.

He can sleep in the little room downstairs where MacDonald kept his cold frames. Beth Franklin will be glad to take Susie and Jake. Susie is a good cook in spite of her disposition."

"Jake and Susie have been here practically forever. I don't see how—"

"In books the servants always stay on without wages when the family meets with reverses," Lee said, smiling. "We might hint to Jake and Susie. I don't think they ever read. But, on second thought, we'd better not. They would expect to be fed."

"How can you laugh?" Eleanor asked. "How can you make jokes?"

"I have a cheerful disposition." Her smile faded. "Don't feel so badly about it, Cousin Eleanor. We can make the cottage very attractive. And Clarence can—"

"Clarence!" Eleanor mopped at her eyes with a wisp of linen and lace. "He's a child!"

"Fifteen years old, to be exact. He's next in line to Thalia. He can be taught to take care of the furnace and bring in wood and wash dishes. You won't mind when you've made the change. There will be plenty of room. Let's see what Aunt Harriet says."

Aunt Harriet said a great deal.

"It will be draughty," she began. "We'll probably die of pneumonia. I expect there's mould over everything. It hasn't been lived in for years.

Does the plumbing leak? Is the gas range in good condition? I certainly never expected to live in the gardener's cottage. But beggars can't be choosers. I suppose—"

"Beggars!" Eleanor started to weep.

"Please, Cousin Eleanor." Lee felt her patience wearing thin. "We'll all be covered with mildew if you don't stop crying. You needn't stay here, Aunt Harriet. Miss Fanny wants you to live with her. We can get Cousin Alice Oakes to spend the winter with Cousin Eleanor."

"Alice Oakes!" Aunt Harriet sniffed. "She'd talk you into the grave before she had been here a week. And she has a new ailment every day. No, I'll stay here where I belong. You can only die once. Pneumonia's no worse than other things. Does the fireplace draw?"

Aunt Harriet made endless objections. But underneath her complaining, Lee thought that she was secretly excited. When she went up to her room to take her a letter that afternoon, she found Aunt Harriet delving busily into a trunk.

"What are they?" she asked, indicating a growing heap of small paper-backed books.

"Cook books," Aunt Harriet said, emerging from the trunk. "I suppose I'll have to do all of the cooking. Eleanor doesn't know how to boil a potato."

She wore a martyred expression, but Lee caught the gleam in her eyes. Aunt Harriet was

looking forward to cooking meals on the gas range in the cottage. Poor Cousin Eleanor! Good gracious, how she would be bossed! Lee smiled as she went downstairs. But Cousin Eleanor would have good meals. Aunt Harriet was an excellent cook.

For two days Eleanor repeated that she couldn't live in the gardener's cottage, she simply couldn't, that was all. They might just as well stop talking about it. And then, with no apparent reason for her change of heart, she began to make suggestions, to agree to all of Lee's plans.

"It should be repapered," she said, her face bright with interest. "And it ought to be painted outside. Couldn't we put a new sink in the kitchen? I hate that horrid dark one. I do think a kitchen should be cheerful."

"We can't spend money on it," Lee explained as patiently as she could. "The idea is to cut down expenses. I've gone over those bills. I think I can squeeze out enough from Grandmother Bell's legacy to pay all of them a little on account."

"No, Lee, dear, I won't allow it," Cousin Eleanor said. "You've done so much for us now."

"I'm afraid you'll have to allow it unless you want real trouble, lawsuits and all sorts of unpleasantness."

"They wouldn't dare," gasped Eleanor.

"Indeed they would."

"Besides, I'm sure you haven't more than you'll

need for yourself. No, Lee. I won't permit it."

"Oh, what's the use of—?" Lee checked impatient words. Cousin Eleanor, in spite of decided words, looked so helpless, so frightened. She looked, Lee thought, like a little girl trying to be brave, knowing that she couldn't. "I'll get along," she said. "Anyway, the bills must be paid. I'll manage somehow."

Eleanor caught Lee's hand.

"I appreciate what you've done," she said, her lips trembling a little. "It was dear of you not to tell Rickey."

"What would have been the use of that?" Lee drew her hand away.

"None at all. That's what I thought, too. But you needn't have done it. The money was yours, your very own. You needn't have—"

"I wanted to," Lee said gently. "Dry your eyes and powder your nose. You've turned into a weeping willow."

"I have, haven't I?" Eleanor smiled through tears. "It's only a loan though, Lee. We'll pay you back," she said grandly. "When business conditions improve, when Rickey makes some money." Her eyes brightened. "I'm not so sure that it wasn't a good thing he left law school. He mightn't have found a position. Perhaps everything happened for the best."

Had it? Lee wondered. She stood at the window looking down across the garden where dah-

lias bloomed against the wall and zinnias lifted ragged disks above the rioting weeds. Was Rickey happy now? She hadn't seen him since that last visit when she had found Elaine in the garden.

Was Rickey happy now? Had the glow returned to Elaine's dark eyes? She thought of them as she had seen them under the elm tree, clinging to each other as though that moment were the end of the world.

"What?" she asked absently, thinking that Cousin Eleanor had asked her a question.

"I was humming," Eleanor said. "Will there be room for my chaise longue besides the dressing-table and the bed? I'd simply be lost without it. And the lowboy? I think I'll give that to Elaine." She glanced up at Lee, looking so miserable that Lee went to her quickly.

"What is it?" she asked. "What's the matter?" Eleanor's eyes filled with tears.

"Does Elaine love Rickey enough?" she asked. "Will he be happy with her?"

Lee looked out through the window where the branches of the elm tree moved in the gentle wind. "I wish I knew," she said wistfully.

Chapter Twenty-one: TO ORCHARD COTTAGE

THE ORCHARD COTTAGE came to life. Smoke curled up from the chimney. The casement windows stood open to let the wind blow through.

Jake cut the weeds and the grass, trimmed the vines that grew thickly over the walls up to the low, shingled roof. Susie routed cobwebs, swept and scrubbed, polished the windows until they shone.

"That Susie!" Aunt Harriet said. "She's been complaining about the work for the last year and a half. Never a civil word out of her. Mumble, grumble under her breath. And now she has turned into a mourning dove because she and Jake are going to the Franklins."

Susie mourned extravagantly. Jake was deeply distressed. "I an' Susie been at Robin Hill goin' on twenty-eight years," Jake repeated at intervals. "Won't no other place seem lak home."

"It's only for a little while," Lee said, to console him. "You'll be coming back when we open the house again."

"This is a temporary arrangement," Eleanor told her friends who came to call. She would be as excited as a little girl with a doll house talking about the cottage until she remembered that they were going to live there because they hadn't any money. Then her lips would tremble and tears would fill her eyes. Everyone thought she was very brave and told her so, which helped her to bear the thought of only one bathroom and no help except Clarence.

"I think she's wonderful," Mrs. Carey remarked to Mr. Carey. "Her husband worshiped

her. She's never had to lift her hand. And she doesn't seem to mind at all."

But Mrs. Dowling said to her Sam, "Well, if you're asking me—"

"I'm not," said Mr. Dowling, retiring behind his newspaper.

"—I think," his wife continued, not at all abashed, "that it's a shame she didn't take Jim Connell when she had a chance. Don't tell me he didn't ask her. I know there was something. He hasn't been here for— Well, not since a year ago, the time he had dinner up there. I've always suspected that the boy had something to do with it. You know how he acted that day at the Club, like the Prince of Wales or something. I doubt if the Prince would have acted so stiff and unpleasant. Lola Duke met him in London last spring and she says he's perfectly lovely, so simple and unaffected. But— What was I talking about? Something must be the matter with my mind!"

Lee plunged headlong into an orgy of beautifying the cottage. John helped her.

"I want to," he said. "You're going away. I'm going to lose you so soon. Besides you look sweet in overalls, with your hair mussed up that way and a streak of paint on your nose. Unless you don't want me undertoot—"

"I do want you, John. I—I'll miss you dreadfully." She turned and staid at the room.

"Could we paint the woodwork?" she asked abruptly, after a moment. "Would it be a hopeless job?"

She didn't care if it was hopeless or not. She had to do something. She was confused and restless those last weeks at Robin Hill. Her fluctuating spirits lifted her to breathless heights, plunged her fathoms deep in despair. Sometimes she was confident that she would be a great singer. She saw herself on a concert stage giving wings to the lark in her throat. Sometimes nothing seemed possible and the thought of going to New York made her feel sick and faint.

What if she couldn't really sing? The thought was not to be borne. If she couldn't, there would be nothing left. She would grow old taking care of Cousin Eleanor, being "Cousin Shirley" to Rickey's children, never having a life of her own. That shouldn't happen. She would make Rickey and John proud of her. John? Why should she want John to be proud of her? The idea was unexpected, bewildering. But she did. She would work hard.

Feeling better, she would sing a snatch of song, her voice ringing clear and true through the mild September air. A moment later, the doubts and uncertainties would return. What if she couldn't really sing?

She toiled at the task of renovating the cottage. John was often there. They painted the wood-

work a soft cream white and did over the downstairs floors. They attempted, without much success, to re-paper a bedroom. Lee's hands wore smudges of varnish and paint. John said he had corns on his knees. Cousin Eleanor admired everything, tiptoeing across the floor before the paint was dry, measuring for curtains, losing the measurements, and then going out to lie in a canvas chair under one of the apple trees.

"Aren't you ever tired?" John asked, one afternoon, pausing from his labor to smoke a cigarette.

"I'm ready to drop this minute." Lee dropped her brush into a can and sat back on an unpainted part of the floor. "I'd lie right down here and go to sleep except that I'd stick fast."

"Then stop it." John said, thinking how weary she looked. "You're through. There's no sense in killing yourself."

"Gr-r-r!" Lee grimaced. "You sound like an old bear!"

"I'm cross because I love you. You're as fidgety as a mosquito. Your eyes are too big for your face. Let's put a rug over that bare place and not paint another inch."

"I like to be tired," Lee said. When she was tired, she could sleep. She didn't lie awake fretting about whether she could sing, wondering if Rickey was happy, wondering whether she would ever get over this restless unhappiness. "I like to

be tired," she repeated. "It's nice to go to sleep."

"Little idiot!" John's expression was severe. "I'd like to spank you. I'd like to kiss you. I do love you, Lee."

Was Rickey happy now? Two months had passed since his last visit with Elaine. She wondered if Rickey knew that Cousin Eleanor and Aunt Harriet were going to live in the cottage.

"Have you told Rickey," she asked Eleanor one afternoon. Eleanor sat at the table in the kitchen cutting scalloped paper to line the cupboard shelves. Lee stood on a chair placing glasses of jelly on the highest shelf. Clarence, a small, kinky-haired boy with an anxious chocolate-brown face, was handing the glasses of jelly up to Lee, frowning with earnestness, holding each glass as though it were costly and rare.

"Told Rickey what?" Eleanor asked. "Do you like this paper, Lee? Wasn't the yellow prettier? I sort of think it was."

"About living in the cottage. That's grape, Clarence, I want all the apple first."

"Yessum, Miss Lee." Clarence returned to the table, spelled the labels half aloud. His back was rigid with earnestness. He was anxiously striving to please.

"No, I haven't told Rickey." Eleanor laid down her scissors, sat looking out through the window between the green checked curtains.

"You'd better, hadn't you?" Lee placed a glass

plainly marked *Apple* in a row labeled *Currant*.

"I've been meaning to tell him." Eleanor's shoulders drooped. "But I was afraid he would worry."

"He might come home and find the house closed." *He might bring Elaine*, Lee thought. It would be embarrassing to bring Elaine for a week-end at Robin Hill and find them living in the cottage.

"I'll do it," Eleanor said.

But she didn't write that evening, and the next day, Saturday, Rickey came home.

Lee was walking across the lawn toward the orchard when she heard a car coming up along the drive. She held one handle of a washbasket packed with china. Clarence held the other. She stood still when she heard the car, watched it come to a stop in front of the house. It was a hired car from West Grove. A card labeled *Taxi* was fastened to the windshield.

Who could be coming, she wondered, in a hired car from West Grove? A stranger, surely. Lee glanced down at her paint-stained overalls, her bare ankles, her sandals. Well, there wasn't time to escape. The stranger, whoever it was, must surely have seen her before the car came to a stop.

"Let us be brave," she said to Clarence. "Maybe he'll think I'm the paper hanger's daughter."

And then she saw that it was Rickey.

"Hello!" he called, dropping a traveling bag,

walking toward her across the lawn.

Lee dropped her end of the basket.

"Whoa dere!" Clarence cried in an anguished voice. "Shore Gawd in Heaven you done smash all dem dishes!"

"Rickey!" Lee's cheeks were very pink. "Why didn't you— Where is your car?"

"I've sold it," he said. "Lord, I'm tired! The train was as hot as a furnace."

He looked tired, Lee thought, tired and very thin. His skin had lost its golden tones. His shoulders drooped. Even his smile was tired.

"Did you—? Where is Elaine?" she asked.

"She's spending the week-end with friends in Connecticut." Rickey picked up the traveling bag. "Where's everybody? I want a bath and something cold to drink."

Lee thought he would notice that the house was upset when he walked through the hall and upstairs. He didn't, apparently. He moved as though he were walking in his sleep. He looked dreadfully tired.

They had supper out-of-doors. Rickey ate scarcely anything, though Eleanor coaxed and persuaded. He sat, silent and preoccupied, looking toward the steps down to the garden.

Aunt Harriet broke the news. "It's a good thing you came this week-end," she said. "We're moving into the cottage the first of next week."

Rickey did not understand, at first. When

Eleanor had added to Aunt Harriet's remark and Lee had briefly explained, he looked at them with startled, incredulous eyes.

"You're going to live in the cottage?" he asked. "In the orchard where MacDonald lived?"

"It looks sweet," Eleanor said quickly. "Lee and John have done wonders. Wait until you see the fresh paint and the curtains. I know we're going to love it."

"But, Mother, why?"

"The house is too big," Lee said. "You won't be here and neither will I."

"Are you—are we as hard up as that?"

"My income has been cut," Eleanor said, looking very uncomfortable. "It's just for a little while, just until things pick up."

"Good Lord!" Rickey groaned. "Mother, I—"

"You aren't to worry." Eleanor's hand touched his sleeve. "We're going to love the cottage. We have a new butler, Rickey," she said as Clarence came out from the house looking anxiously over the far end of a tray. "You'll take care of us, won't you, Clarence?"

"Yes, ma'am, Miss El'nor." Clarence set down the tray with a sigh of relief. "Nobody better not come foolin' round here. Shore Gawd in Heaven Ah'll shoot 'em dead."

Rickey abruptly left the table.

The supper things had been cleared away when Rickey returned to the house. Lee sat with Elea-

nor on the veranda. Rickey stretched out in a chair. Lee and Eleanor talked, avoiding any mention of the cottage. Rickey, again, was silent and preoccupied. Presently he threw his cigarette out into the grass.

"I'm going to bed," he said, pulling himself up from the chair. "I'm worse than all in tonight."

But he didn't go to bed. Lee heard him moving about his room. Very late, when the house was still, she heard him open his door and go downstairs. She slipped into her dressing-gown and sat, hugging her knees, on the window-seat in her room. The clock, ticking on the mantel, sounded loud in the after-midnight quiet. Where had Rickey gone? Was he unhappy out there alone in the warm, dewy silence?

The clock chimed one and two, tiny clear notes. Lee's curly head drooped. She couldn't go to sleep until Rickey had returned. Where was he? The poppies weren't blooming in the garden now. Where was Rickey? He had looked so dreadfully tired.

A door, downstairs, opened and closed. Footsteps crept quietly up the stairs. Lee flew to the door, opened it a little. Rickey was walking along the hall. She saw him go into his room and close the door. Feeling contented, she slipped into bed, nestled her head in the pillows.

The next day Rickey seemed a little more like himself. He went with Lee and Eleanor to in-

spect the cottage. "It looks all right. But it's small," he said. "After the big house, this will feel like a chicken-coop."

"No it won't," Eleanor said brightly. "There'll be plenty of room." She led him along the narrow second-floor hall. "This is my room and this is Aunt Harriet's. This will be your room or Lee's, whenever either of you is at home. There'll be the cot downstairs, too. By doubling up we could accommodate a house-party."

"You're a good sport," Rickey said gently. Eleanor beamed. Lee felt a lump in her throat.

Chapter Twenty-two: RICKEY IS NOT HAPPY

RICKEY LAY in Eleanor's chair under one of the apple trees. Lee sat in the doorway of the cottage leaning back against the wall. The sun was setting behind the woods in a glory of rose and flame.

"This was your idea, wasn't it?" Rickey asked after a long interval of silence.

"What?" Lee roused from half-awake dreams, clasped her hands around her knees.

"This idea of living in the cottage."

"Don't you think it's a good one?"

"Yes," Rickey said slowly. "That's why I knew you had thought of it. You're awfully good to us, Lee."

Lee flushed and looked down at her hands.

"Is Mother so strapped? Isn't there any money?"

"Very little just now. You know how things are."

Rickey laughed briefly, bitterly.

"Lord, yes!" he said. "You never think of such things happening to your own family. Will they be able to live—decently, I mean?"

"I think so. Aunt Harriet has a small income."

"Mother never mentions money to me."

"She doesn't want you to worry. You needn't. They'll get along all right."

They were silent again. Rickey gazed up through the foliage of the trees at the rose-misted blue of the sky. Lee looked at Rickey.

"It's great to be here," he said presently. "I wish I could stay. I wish I needn't go back."

"Don't you like New York?" Lee asked, watching Rickey's face intently.

"I hate it," he said vehemently. "This summer has been awful."

"It will be better soon," Lee said encouragingly. "When the weather is cooler."

"Maybe," Rickey said. "I don't know. Everything is so muddled."

"What is muddled?" Lee asked, sitting very still, almost holding her breath.

"There isn't much business. I don't get anywhere. I'm likely to lose my job almost any time. Not that it's much of a job. And—Lee," he asked

suddenly, "do girls cry when they are happy? Do they get nervous and thin? Are they restless, always wanting to go somewhere, never satisfied anywhere?"

"All girls are different, I suppose," Lee said slowly. She felt her heart turn over. Rickey looked so dreadfully tired, so haggard and unhappy.

"Elaine says she is happy." Rickey lit a cigarette. Lee saw that his hands trembled a little.

"Some girls aren't ever happy." Elaine was like that, Lee thought. She saw Elaine in the garden, touching the petals of the pink and golden poppies, heard her saying, "I wish I had died a month ago."

"*She was*," Rickey said.

"I know." Lee's hands clasped her knees tightly.

"*She was* happy," Rickey repeated. "I'm sure she was. She isn't now. I've done everything I could—" His face twisted. "Why am I such a failure, Lee?"

"You aren't," she said, wanting to comfort him, wanting to do something for Rickey.

"I am," he said. "I can't—" His voice broke. He turned his head so that Lee couldn't see his face. Long ash fell from his cigarette, the fire almost touched his fingers.

"You'll burn yourself," Lee said.

Rickey dropped the smouldering stub. He

turned to her. "Will I ever amount to anything?" he asked. "Do you believe in me, Lee?"

"Oh, Rickey, yes," she said earnestly. If she could keep her voice from trembling. . . .

"That makes me feel better." Rickey brightened a little. "When are you coming to New York?"

"Next month. The tenth of October. Madame Lucia returns from Europe the fifteenth. That will give me a few days to get settled before lessons begin."

"I'm glad you're coming."

"Are you, Rickey?" Her face lighted swiftly with pleasure.

"Can I come to see you, sometimes?"

"Any time."

"Sir Faithful," Rickey smiled. "It's comfortable to be with you. I don't have to stand on my tiptoes. I don't have to pretend to be bigger than I am. You think I'm a regular guy, don't you?"

"I still think you're very conceited." She smiled.

"It seems to me I've heard that before. Here comes the butler. What does he want?"

Clarence came toward them under the apple trees. He stopped at a respectful distance, his small brown face very grave and important.

"Miss El'nor say you all better get started," Clarence announced, "if you don't want to miss the train."

"I'm perfectly willing to miss it." Rickey rose reluctantly. Clarence departed at a snail's pace. The sunset colors had faded now. Twilight was falling. A whippoorwill called plaintively. Rickey caught Lee's hands, pulled her up from the step.

"Will you drive me in to the station?" he asked.

She nodded. She didn't dare to speak.

"You're a darling, Lee." He tilted her face, smiled down into her eyes, a weary smile, infinitely appealing. "I'm glad you're going to New York." He bent to kiss her. She turned her head. Rickey's lips brushed her cheek. "Will you let me come and tell you my troubles? Will you go out with me, sometimes, Lee?"

"Yes," she said softly, breathlessly.

He drew her close to him.

"Sir Faithful," he said.

Chapter Twenty-three: AUNT HARRIET PROPHECIES

JUDY CAUGHT Lee in a quick embrace as the train pulled into the station.

"Good-by," she said. "You're coming on Friday, Lee?"

"Yes." Lee emerged from the embrace with her hat pushed over one eye.

"For sure?" Judy's expression was anxious.

"Cross my heart."

The train came to a stop. John picked up

Judy's traveling case. Judy moved toward the steps. Then, abruptly, she stopped.

"I don't trust you," she said. "Come with me now."

"Crazy!" Lee laughed. "Like this?"

"I'll wait over until this afternoon."

"I can't. You know I'm going to sing at the Club Benefit Wednesday night."

"Oh, dear!" Judy wailed. "Let John tell them you can't."

"And miss wearing that costume? No, Judy, I can't."

"Better hurry," John advised.

"Good heavens!" Judy scampered to the steps. "Make her come, John," she called, leaning from the platform of the coach.

"I'll do my best," John promised, "no matter how much it hurts."

The train began to move.

"The five o'clock train," Judy called above the grinding sound of the wheels. "I'll be there. If you disappoint me—"

The threat was lost in a medley of sounds. Lee watched until Judy's scarf was a bright speck in the distance. Then she turned to John.

"Isn't Judy funny?" she asked. "Isn't she a darling?"

"I like her," John said.

"I thought you did. She likes you. That's high praise, Mr. Walton."

"I'm duly appreciative. Well, here we are." He opened the door of his car. "And here is a made-to-order day, lots of sunshine, a tasty blue sky, very nice-smelling air. Let's drive out to the Willowmere Inn for lunch."

"Mr. King Midas!" Lee teased.

"It's a celebration. I think the Darlingtons are going to let me design a house for them."

"That's splendid, John." Lee's eyes shone with admiration.

"Splendid! It's a miracle. Let's celebrate."

"I can't. I've hardly started to pack. And Tony Brooke is coming after lunch to practice for Wednesday night."

John looked disappointed. "I'm very sorry," he said, turning the car toward Robin Hill. "I never argue with ladies, especially pretty ones."

Aunt Harriet was coming up from the garden with an armful of dahlias when John stopped the car in front of the old stone house.

"When will I see you again?" John asked, as Lee sprang out of the car.

"Wednesday night."

"Not before?"

"I'll be busy. No, not before Wednesday night."

Lee waved at John, paused to admire Aunt Harriet's dahlias and went into the house.

The hall looked dreadfully forlorn with the rugs rolled up and the chandelier in a bag. The

living-room was dismal, too. The curtains were down, the furniture was covered with linen slips. There were gaps here and there where things had been moved to the cottage. Lee's spirits drooped. It was sad to see Robin Hill so lifeless and forlorn. Feeling very gloomy, she went into the music room.

What should she sing on Wednesday night? "Something quaint and old-fashioned," Mrs. Carey had said. Something, Lee thought, to match the costume Mrs. Carey, assisted by Cousin Eleanor, had made for her. She thought of the frilled white organdy dress, the pantalettes, the poke-bonnet lined with pink. All at once she didn't feel like singing, like wearing the pretty costume. But Mrs. Carey had insisted. Oh, well—

"Something quaint and old-fashioned." Lee turned through a pile of music. "The Lilac Tree," that would do. "An Old Fashioned Garden." It was strange to think that the next time she turned through the music she would be in New York. Strange and very frightening. Would Rickey come to see her there? He would if he was unhappy. Was he happier now? He had hated so to go back to the city. She thought of his last visit home. "Will you let me tell you my troubles?" Rickey had asked. That was nearly a month ago. . . .

Aunt Harriet came into the room and sank down on the crash-covered love-seat.

"I'm too old to pick flowers," she said. She laid the dahlias beside her. They looked very gay in the dim, bare room. "What are you doing, Lee?"

"Finding something to sing." Lee continued to turn through the music.

"Oh," Aunt Harriet breathed heavily. "Benefits!" she said. "They're nothing but work and worry and people getting their feelings hurt. Why don't they give the money outright? That boy is in love with you."

"Who?" Lee asked, startled at the abrupt statement.

"Young John Walton," Aunt Harriet said. "You could do much worse."

Lee flushed and turned away.

"You needn't pretend not to hear me." Aunt Harriet's bright eyes observed her keenly. "Has he asked you to marry him?"

"Well, really, Aunt Harriet—"

"I know it's none of my business," Aunt Harriet snapped. "He has asked you, I know."

Lee turned the music silently. Deep pink suffused her face and throat.

"Sometime he will stop asking you. How will you like that?"

"I should be very glad if he found—"

"If he found someone else that he wanted to marry? Well, maybe you would. But I'm pleased to say that you sound annoyed."

Had she sounded annoyed? Lee felt confused and troubled. Would she be sorry if John wanted to marry somebody else? She hadn't thought of it. He was always there, doing things for her, wanting to make her happy. If she should lose John—

"I know what I'm talking about." Aunt Harriet looked self-conscious. "His grandfather stopped asking *me*."

Lee's eyes widened.

"Did the Judge want you to marry him?"

"He said he did. I wenty times or so. I wasn't always fat. I used to be considered a very pretty girl."

"Why didn't you marry him? The Judge is so nice."

"I thought I loved someone else," Aunt Harriet said.

"Uncle Henry?" Lee barely remembered great-uncle Henry, a thin little man with whiskers and a parchment-colored skin.

"No," Aunt Harriet said. "A pretty boy with curly hair. When I found I didn't want him, John Walton had married. Your Uncle Henry came along. He was a satisfactory husband," she said.

"But you wish you had married the Judge?"

"I can admit it now. I wouldn't have twenty years ago. Women are always doing that. They

transform a man into a god. They never see him as he is. That's one reason why Eleanor worships Rickey, whether she knows it or not. Besides, Eleanor was born a pretty fool. You weren't. Of course it's none of my business."

"I'm not going to marry," Lee said. "I'm going to sing."

"Fiddlesticks! You're bound to marry. You can't help yourself. You aren't the kind that can sacrifice everything for a career. Judy can, maybe. You can't."

"Am I such a spineless creature?"

"Now, now, don't get upset," Aunt Harriet said soothingly. "You have plenty of courage and spunk. But you're a woman, Lee. You wouldn't be happy if you tried to sacrifice everything for a career. You might as well marry John."

"But you don't understand, Aunt Harriet—"

"I understand more than you think. But talking does no good." Aunt Harriet grasped the arms of the love-seat and pulled herself up slowly. "I'm only wasting my breath. At my age I can't afford to. When young people listen to old ones, the millenium will have arrived. I don't see any signs of it yet."

Chapter Twenty-four: RICKEY COMES HOME AGAIN

LEE STOOD in the bright disk of spotlight, her hands in pink lace mitts holding a small bouquet

with a paper frill. The organdy dress with its tight bodice and shallow neck ruffled out over the swaying hoop. Her cheeks wore the tint of the poke-bonnet lined with pink. Her small strapped slippers, under lace pantalettes, moved lightly to the rhythm of the music.

*"It was an old-fashioned garden,
Just an old-fashioned garden"*

she sang, feeling a little tired. This was her fourth encore. She had told Tony, playing the accompaniment, that it would be the last. The audience liked her. They hadn't applauded nearly so hard for Anne Carey's dance or the lively efforts of the chorus. Perhaps she could really sing. Or perhaps it was the costume. Judge Walton had told her that she looked like an old man's dream of the sweetheart he never had.

*"I saw an old-fashioned missus
Getting old-fashioned kisses"*

The words were silly but the melody was appealing. Her eyes strayed around the dim circle where people sat at small tables. There was Judge Walton's silver white head. There was Aunt Harriet. It was strange to think they had loved each other a very long time ago. There was John with Cousin Eleanor. He looked nice in

evening clothes. Would she regret, sometime, that she hadn't married John? What was Rickey doing tonight? Was he dancing somewhere with Elaine? Or was he tired and unhappy? The day after tomorrow she was going to New York.

*"In an old-fashioned garden
From an old-fashioned beau."*

Lee sang the last word of the song. The music stopped with a rippling chord. The applause sounded like rain on a low tin roof. The spotlight was lost in lights from the ceiling and walls. The orchestra swung into a dance tune. Couples came out onto the floor to dance. Lee started toward the dressing-room. John caught her, held out his arms.

"I can't dance in this," she said, looking down at the hoopskirt and pantalettes, the slippers tied with ribbon around her ankles.

"Why not?" John asked. "You look sweet."

Smiling, she slipped into his arms. They were not permitted to circle the floor. People stopped them to congratulate Lee. Mrs. Carey approached with a man Lee had never seen.

"Shirley, dear, this is Mr. Vernon," she said. "Miss Penfield, Mr. Vernon."

"I'm very happy to meet you," the gentleman said, holding Lee's hand in its pink lace mitt. "I enjoyed your performance very much."

"Mr. Vernon arranges radio programs," Mrs. Carey explained.

"If you're looking for an opportunity—" Mr. Vernon began.

Mrs. Carey interrupted. "She isn't," she said, smiling at Lee. "She's going to New York to study."

"Friday," Lee said. "The day after tomorrow."

"That's too bad. I might have been able to make you an offer." Mr. Vernon took a case from his pocket, opened it and handed Lee a card. "If you ever care to consider our offer," he said, "you'll find me at this address."

Lee thanked him, tucked the card inside the bodice of her dress.

"Well, well," John said when they were dancing again. "There's an anchor to windward."

"Oh, John, do you think I could?" She tilted her head back to look up at him, her cheeks warmly flushed, her eyes shining like stars.

"Certainly you could," John said tenderly. "Don't you know that you sing like an angel and—"

"Do angels sing? I thought they played golden harps."

"Don't be sarcastic with me, young lady."

He held her close. "You do look so lovely, Lee."

She was happy dancing with John. The music lifted her beyond worries, up, up, until she felt

as though she were floating among the stars. She forgot that the thought of going to New York frightened her a little. She forgot that Robin Hill was lifeless and forlorn, she forgot she was dancing with John. She floated among the stars.

Then the music stopped and they stood near the door.

"There's Clarence!" John's voice sounded astonished. "What is he doing here?"

Lee shook the stardust from her eyes and looked out into the hall. Clarence was there grimacing like a monkey, making sounds to attract her attention. She went to him, moving lightly, the hoop skirt swaying like a flower in the wind.

"What is it?" she asked. "Clarence. What are you doing here?"

"Mistah Rickey—!" Clarence gulped to catch his breath.

"Rickey—?" The color went out of Lee's cheeks.

"He sick." Clarence looked anxious and important and very much out of breath. "He say where is everybody. Ah say you—all—"

"Where is he?" Lee caught the small Negro's shoulder.

"He home. He say he awful sick. He say, 'Clar nce, go fin somebody.' Ah runs fas' as Ah kin. Ah all tuckered out, Miss Lee."

Lee turned to John. Her eyes were wide and

frightened. Her face was as white as the organdy dress. "Will you take me home?" she asked.

"Of course. Don't be frightened. It may not be serious." He caught her hand. She pulled away from him, ran across the veranda and down the steps, across the lawn to the car. John followed. Clarence, still explaining, trotted breathlessly at his heels.

"Shouldn't we have told his mother?" John asked with his foot on the starter.

"Oh, no, John. Don't wait." Lee sat tensely on the edge of the seat, the hoop skirt crushed, the poke bonnet hanging by the ribbons tied under her chin. Clarence leaped wildly into the rumble.

"All right," John said to comfort her. "Don't worry, Lee. It probably isn't serious."

It was a mile and a half from the club to Robin Hill. It seemed very much longer to Lee. The car turned into the lower drive which led to the cottage. Lee sprang out almost before it came to a stop, opened the door, ran upstairs. John waited at the foot of the stairs. Clarence sat on the lowest step, his eyes as big as saucers.

Rickey lay on the bed in the guest room, his face turned to the wall. A lamp with an amber shade brightened his rumpled blond hair. Lee choked back a sob.

"Rickey," she said softly, tenderly.

"Elaine," Rickey murmured. He turned, flung

out his arms. His cheeks were flushed. His eyes were bright with fever.

"Rickey! It's Lee." She caught his hand, held it against her cheek.

"Lee?" He looked at her uncertainly. Then, for a moment, he knew her. "Lee," he said. "I knew you would come. You look so pretty, Lee. You look like a valentine."

As she watched, the light died out of his eyes. He turned again to the wall. "Elaine," he murmured, "Elaine."

Chapter Twenty-five: A LETTER FROM BERMUDA

THE CLOCK chimed eleven. Lee roused and sat up on the sofa beside the fire. She glanced at the clock, rose wearily and went upstairs.

Miss Harris was closing Rickey's door. She looked as neat as wax. Her eyeglasses shone. Her uniform rustled with starch.

"How is he?" Lee asked, her voice hoarse from fatigue.

"About the same." Miss Harris smiled. Her manner was irritatingly cheerful. "You look tired. Can't Mrs. Penfield stay with him to-night?"

"She's worn out. I sent her to bed."

"That's where you should be," Miss Harris said. "We have enough on our hands. We can't have you getting sick."

"I'm not tired. Good night, Miss Harris."

Miss Harris rustled down the hall to Eleanor's room. Lee opened the door, closed it softly behind her. Rickey was quiet. His eyes were closed. He seemed to be asleep. Lee drew a chair close to the bed and sat there, waiting.

Presently Rickey stirred. "Elaine," he said. "Why are you crying, Elaine?"

Lee bit her lips. Tears rolled down over her cheeks.

"You were happy, Elaine. Why aren't you happy now?" He opened his eyes.

"Rickey—" Lee bent over the bed.

"Lee? What are you doing here?"

She held his hand. Presently he was quiet. Lee walked to the window. The apple trees were silver and black in the moonlight. She stood there looking out. At a sound she returned to the bed.

"Elaine," Rickey muttered. "I can't stand this strain. I'm going home. Elaine—"

His hands jerked the counterpane. Lee held them until they were quiet. He closed his eyes. His face looked peaceful, almost natural, except for the flush of fever.

Lee waited. Then she went out into the hall. Eleanor was there, huddled against the door.

"How is he?" she asked.

"He's sleeping. I thought you had gone to bed."

"I couldn't sleep." Eleanor pressed her hand

against her head. "Is he still talking about Elaine?"

Lee nodded.

"Don't you think we'd better—?"

"I'm going to call her now."

Lee went down to the telephone. Eleanor followed. The operator was a long time getting the call through. Lee shivered. Eleanor put the afghan from the sofa around her shoulders. She did not feel its warmth. Her hand, holding the receiver, trembled.

A voice answered, thin and far away. It wasn't Elaine. Elaine was not at home. Lee explained who she was. The voice belonged to Mrs. Archer. It sounded cool and distant. Elaine had gone to Bermuda for a month. She wasn't sure of the address. The Hotel Hamilton, perhaps.

"Well?" Eleanor asked.

"She has gone to Bermuda," Lee said.

"To Bermuda!" Eleanor sank down on the sofa, buried her face in her hands. "She's gone to Bermuda and Rickey is ill. It's all her fault. He wouldn't have left college if she hadn't persuaded him. He wouldn't have spent the summer in New York. I hate her," she sobbed.

"Don't, please, Cousin Eleanor." Lee sat beside her and stroked her hand. "This doesn't help Rickey. It isn't good for you. I must go back. You come to bed."

"You call me if anything—" Eleanor stopped

outside Rickey's door, and stood, listening.

"Yes," Lee promised. She kissed her lightly. "Please try to sleep."

"I will." Eleanor's arms held Lee. "What would we do without you?" she asked, beginning to weep again.

"You don't have to wonder. I'm here."

Eleanor opened the door of the room she shared temporarily with Aunt Harriet. Lee went in to Rickey.

The next day she sent a cablegram to Elaine. *Rickey is ill. I thought you would like to know.*

The days passed, fantastic days, sleepless nights of watching, and no message came from Elaine. A week after she had sent the cablegram a letter arrived for Lee.

It would do no good for me to come, Elaine wrote. There is nothing I can say to Rickey. Everything has already been said. He was restless. He wanted to get away from me. I should have realized it sooner. I can't write to Rickey. But I can write to you. Will you try to understand?

I was happy with Rickey for a time. It didn't last. We tormented each other, It all seemed so hopeless. Do you remember the day in the garden at Robin Hill? I was right then, Lee. You can't go back. We tried and always failed.

We hurt each other so.

I have no message for Rickey, except that I'm sorry he is ill. With all my heart, I want him to be happy. He wasn't happy with me. I wanted more than he could give. Not material things. Whatever you think of me, don't think that. Will you try to understand?

Lee didn't give Eleanor the letter from Elaine. She knew Cousin Eleanor couldn't understand. She wasn't sure that she understood. She thought of it very often. Elaine had wanted more than Rickey could give. She had expected too much. It wasn't Rickey's faults that had hurt her. It was some lack in Rickey. She couldn't hate Elaine. There was sadness in the letter. Rickey, for Elaine, had been a mirage. It was sad for both of them. It was something no one could control.

She couldn't read the letter to Rickey. Except for brief intervals, he was unconscious of everything in the world. Doctor Cameron came twice a day. Other doctors came. They were frankly puzzled.

"I don't know why we can't get that fever down," Dr. Cameron said one morning to Lee.

"Do you think—? Is he going to—?" Lee could not complete the question. She couldn't believe that Rickey might die. He had been so alive, so spirited. Rickey couldn't die. The thought was not to be borne.

"He has a splendid constitution." Dr. Cameron patted her shoulder. "There's no reason why he shouldn't pull through."

But Rickey did not improve. The days passed. Nothing seemed quite real. Lee reached and passed exhaustion. The cottage was uncomfortably full. "If only we hadn't closed the house!" Eleanor often mourned. Rickey could not be moved. They were obliged to remain at the cottage.

Fantastic days. Judy called from New York. That seemed unreal, too. Going to live with Judy was like something Lee had dreamed. Feeling as though she were moving through a nightmare, she helped Aunt Harriet with the cooking, gave instructions to Clarence, went on errands for Miss Harris, listened for hours while Cousin Eleanor talked of Rickey. Nothing was real except those infrequent moments when Rickey seemed to know her.

John coaxed her to walk with him.

"You must get some exercise," he would say, his heart aching for her.

She walked with him, sometimes. They went to the cabin and built a fire. John talked of impersonal things, trying to divert her, amuse her, make her forget for a time. His efforts were not successful. She was always impatient to return to the cottage. When he talked to her, he knew that her thoughts were there.

John raged silently. The family imposed on her, he thought angrily. They permitted her to shoulder their burdens. And yet the qualities which kept her faithful to them were the things that he loved in her: her tenderness, her impulsive generosity, her loyalty, her courage. He wouldn't have had her different. He wanted to take care of her, to charm away the sadness deep in her eyes.

There were times when he thought that he helped her. Her face brightened when he came to the cottage. She would walk with him through the garden, cutting the early chrysanthemums, scolding Eric for chasing a squirrel, smiling when the squirrel escaped to the highest limb of a tree. He brought her presents, flowers, Japanese persimmons, a trinket, an amusing book. He wanted so much to help her. But there was so little that he could do.

One day Rickey seemed to be worse. Dr. Cameron came three times. A waiting hush filled the cottage.

They talked in whispers, anxious, hoping, trying to hide the fear in their hearts.

"Call me at once if there is any change," Miss Harris said when Lee went upstairs at eleven o'clock.

"Do you think—?" Lee's hand crept up to her throat.

"I think he'll be better in the morning," Miss

Harris said wearily but cheerfully. "But call me if there is any change."

Lee went quietly into the room. She looked at Rickey lying so still in the dim glow of the shaded lamp. He did not need her now. She sat at the window looking out at the frosty stars. An hour passed, two hours. Was Rickey going to die?

There was a sound from the bed. Lee went to Rickey, her heart in her throat. His eyes were open. He knew her.

"Lee—?" he said in a natural voice.

"Yes, Rickey, dear."

"What am I doing here?"

"You've been ill."

"Have I? I don't remember. How long?"

"Over a month."

"Then I needn't go back to New York?"

"No. Just get well."

He sighed contentedly, reached for her hand.

"I'm sleepy," he said.

"Go to sleep."

"You won't go away?"

"No. I won't go away."

He closed his eyes, breathed evenly, naturally. Lee sat very still, holding his hand. She had promised to call Miss Harris. But she knew that the change was for the better. She was sleepy, so very sleepy. Her lashes drooped, her head sank down to the pillow. Rickey wasn't going to die. Relief flooded her heart. Drowsiness washed over

her in slow delicious waves. She nestled her head in the pillow, sighed heavily and fell asleep.

Chapter Twenty-six: LEE PAYS THE BILLS

RICKEY IMPROVED rapidly. Soon he was strong enough to sit in a chair by the window, a few hours every day. Then he went downstairs to lie on the sofa beside the fire. Before long he walked out, on sunny days, through the orchard, along the drive. His appetite was enormous. The glow of health returned, bringing color to his cheeks.

A breath of air blew through the cottage. Miss Harris departed. Doctor Cameron's visits ceased. Eleanor fussed lovingly over Rickey, making egg-nogs, tucking pillows behind him, humming as she moved lightly about her pleasant tasks. Aunt Harriet performed miracles in the kitchen. Clarence, solemn and important, brought wood for the fire, kept the silver shining, announced visitors with the dignity of a majordomo.

Lee devoted herself to Rickey, happy because he needed her, because he was getting well. She read to him, sang the songs he liked to the accompaniment of the small cottage piano, walked with him in the crisp December air. His illness seemed like a dreadful dream.

He never mentioned Elaine. She wondered whether or not she should tell him of Elaine's letter from Bermuda. She tried, many times, to

speak of her casually. Somehow she couldn't do it. It seemed like prying into Rickey's private affairs.

And then, one day, she did. She sat at the desk, addressing Christmas cards for Rickey. Rickey lay on the sofa, his arms folded under his head.

"And Jim Grant and the Marshalls," Rickey said, completing his list. "I guess that's all."

"Elaine?" Lee suggested softly.

There was silence for a moment. Then Rickey said, "That's all over, Lee."

What had she done? Feeling sorry and ashamed, Lee glanced at Rickey. He didn't look very unhappy. He lay gazing into the fire, looking unfamiliar in his dressing-gown of heavy figured silk. As she watched, his eyes turned to the window. "It's snowing," he said. "We may have a white Christmas, after all."

He didn't want to talk about Elaine. But he didn't look very unhappy. Lee, watching Rickey had a feeling of pity for Elaine. Her letter had been so sad. "That's all over," Rickey had said and had noticed that it was snowing. She was glad that he wasn't unhappy. But she couldn't help feeling sorry for Elaine.

Before the end of January, Rickey was himself again.

"Doesn't he look well?" Eleanor asked as she stood at the window with Lee one morning watching Rickey shovel a path through the snow

which had fallen during the night.

"Yes," Lee agreed. "You wouldn't know he had been ill."

"I can't see any reason why you shouldn't go to New York now," Eleanor said brightly.

"Can't you?" Lee asked.

"We'll get along very well. Rickey will be getting a position soon. He isn't going back to New York. He knew I didn't want him to, though I didn't even hint. I think it's very thoughtful of him to give up his splendid opportunities there just because he has a silly, worrying mother. He's going to find something in Philadelphia so he can live at home. I'm glad to say he seems to have got over Elaine."

"Has he?" Lee pleated the frill of the curtain.

"We had a nice little talk about it. He said they just found out it was a mistake. Rickey is a gentleman. He wouldn't have told me anything that wasn't to her credit. But just between you and me she was a selfish minx."

"I don't think so. Cousin Eleanor," Lee said.

"She ran off to Bermuda, didn't she, when Rickey was ill. But I don't think he worried himself sick about her. I think it was overwork."

"She wrote to me from Bermuda," Lee said.

"She knew it was no use to come here."

"Well, I'm glad she had that much sense. I'm certainly glad it's all over. I want Rickey to marry. But not Elaine." Her thoughts suddenly

veered. "Doesn't it seem strange that neither Miss Harris or Doctor Cameron has ever sent us a bill?"

"They've both been paid," Lee said quietly.

"You did it, Lee?" Eleanor's hand crept up to her throat. "You shouldn't have done that, dear."

"What else could I do?"

"And you haven't enough left? That's why you can't go to New York?"

"Don't cry, Cousin Eleanor. Please."

"But I'm so ashamed. I—"

"It couldn't be helped. I'm sure Rickey didn't want to be ill."

"But Lee— You've given us all your money. What do you—?"

A handful of snow struck the window. They looked out. Rickey was beckoning Lee to come out into the snow. His eyes were bright. There was a healthy glow in his cheeks. He flung the snow from the shovel as though he enjoyed it.

"What do I get out of it?" Lee finished Eleanor's question. "Just seeing Rickey look like that." She caught Eleanor in a quick embrace. "You see, I lo— I'm fond of Rickey, too."

Chapter Twenty-seven: NOTHING IS EVER PERFECT

LEE FLUNG OFF her jacket and cap and went into the living-room. Rickey was finishing breakfast at a small table near the fire. Sunlight streamed

in over the plants in the window.

"Here are the papers," Lee said, smiling at Rickey. "Old Lazy-Bones! I've been up at least three hours."

"I'm an invalid." Rickey smiled.

"That looks like it." Lee pointed at the table which bore evidence of a hearty breakfast.

"I have to keep my strength up."

"Faker!" Lee gave him the papers. He caught her hand. "Your cheeks look like winter roses," he said. "You're awfully pretty, Lee."

"A faker and a flatterer, too." Lee snatched her hand away. "It's cold," she said happily. "It's a perfectly beautiful day."

"Any letters?"

"Only for me!"

Rickey pushed back from the table, went to the sofa, opened the *New York Times*. Lee settled into an armchair with her letters. There were three of them. One informed her that the Elite Beauty Shoppe had moved its location to 84 Willow Street, West Grove, Pennsylvania. The information did not interest her. Her hair was naturally curly, thank Fortune! and her complexion did very well. She tossed it into the scrap basket and ran her finger under the flap of the second envelope.

It was a letter from Mr. Connell, answering the note she had written him to thank him for the opulent basket of fruit he had sent her for

Christmas. He was located in New York for the winter, the letter said. He hoped, if she was there, that he might have the pleasure of taking her to the theater some evening. He closed by sending his kind regards to the household at Robin Hill.

It was odd, Lee thought, that Mr. Connell continued to send her Christmas gifts, continued to answer her notes of thanks. She thought that he must be lonely in spite of having so much money. He had never forgotten her kindness to him that evening when Rickey had been so rude. Perhaps he had really loved Cousin Eleanor. If Cousin Eleanor had married him—*If wishes were horses*, she told herself, slipping the letter back into the envelope. She felt sorry for Mr. Connell. She would write to him soon.

The third letter was from Judy. As she read it Lee's eyes lost their shining look. Judy was going abroad. Passage rates were cheaper, the letter said, and she was going to take a chance.

I've given you up, Judy wrote. I've washed my hands of you completely. I wouldn't dare ask you to come again for fear of a flood or an earthquake. It does look like Fate, I will admit, and I'm not superstitious.

I had tea with Madame Lucia the other day. She said she was ver-r-y sor-

r-y, it was a charming little voice. I'm afraid she has given you up, too. O, Lee, it makes me so mad!

Don't take my raving too much to heart. I don't think you will. I've raved so often that it has lost its bracing effect. Do what you think will make you happy. I'll try to endure it with fortitude. I sail the fifteenth of February in case you want to send me a basket of orchids.

Lee sat looking at the letter. She was glad that Judy was going to Paris. She had wanted to go for so long. But she would miss her dreadfully.

"They're selling apples on the street corners," Rickey informed her, reading from the paper. "I might get a job like that."

"It wouldn't pay." Lee's eyes brightened again. "Not with your present appetite."

"An apple a day—" Rickey chanted and then broke off. "The Nigel Fitzroy-Herberts—get the hyphen, my child—have gone to Montreal for winter sports."

"Do you know them?"

"No. But I thought you should be informed." His smile faded suddenly. He gave a low exclamation.

"What have you discovered?" Lee asked.

He did not answer at once. Presently, "Elaine

is married," he said.

"Oh, Rickey!" The words were a soft cry.

"Here's her picture," Rickey said.

Lee went to sit beside him on the sofa.

"It isn't a good likeness," she said. "It doesn't show how lovely she is."

"She is lovely," Rickey said slowly. "There was a scarlet dress she used to wear—"

"Who is her— Who is the man?" Lee asked.

Rickey brought himself back to the sunny room.

"She met him in Maine. A year ago last summer, at the time I met her. He's filthy with money and at least fifty years old."

"Oh, Rickey!" She looked at him with wide troubled eyes. "I'm so sorry! I—"

"Don't look so tragic," Rickey said gently. "It's the best thing that could have happened."

"Don't you *care*?" Lee asked.

"I want her to be happy. That sounds heroic, doesn't it? I don't mean it that way. She wouldn't have been happy with me. She wasn't, except at first. After I'd been in New York for a while, everything went haywire. It was awful, Lee. We'd talk for hours and then I couldn't sleep. Sometimes I'd walk the streets all night long. I couldn't please her. She'd get a fever for going places, dancing all night, hectic week-ends with people. I'd have to work the next day. The whole thing nearly finished me. I don't know

what she wanted."

"She wanted it to be perfect."

"How do you know?" Rickey asked.

"She wrote to me from Bermuda. You talked about her when you were delirious. I sent her a cablegram. She said she was sorry; that was all."

"It was such a muddle," Rickey continued. "Her mother didn't want her to marry me. That wasn't much of a help. I didn't make anything, hardly. Jim Grant let me stay at his apartment. I shouldn't have left law school, I suppose. But Elaine was so exciting, so lovely-looking. I thought I could conquer the world for her. Lord, what a nasty jolt!"

"Poor Rickey!" Lee said softly. "Poor, poor Elaine!"

"It was a relief when it was over. That's the way I feel now—relieved." He smiled ruefully. "I hate responsibilities. I shouldn't admit that, should I?" He paused and then went on. "I hope Elaine will be happy with this chap. I'm afraid she won't. She expects too much. Nothing is ever perfect."

"She won't expect perfection with him," Lee said thoughtfully. "She won't even want it."

Chapter Twenty-eight: LEE FINDS A JOB

JOHN GLANCED up from the evening paper as Lee passed him walking down the aisle of the train.

"Hello!" he called.

She turned. Her face lighted swiftly with pleasure. "John!" she said, smiling. "You're an answer to prayer. I hate to ride on the train alone."

He rose to let her sit beside the window.

"What have you been doing?" he asked, when she had unbuttoned her short fur jacket and peeled off her soft suede gloves. "Shopping?"

"I've been getting myself a job."

"A job? I didn't know there was one left in the world."

"Do you remember Mrs. Carey's friend, Mr. Vernon?" Lee asked. "We met him at the Club Benefit last fall, the night Rickey came home."

"I remember," John said. He remembered Lee in the ruffled white organdy dress and the poke-bonnet lined with pink. How lovely she had been that night! How lovely she was today with her hair curling out under a dark fur cap, her cheeks flushed with excitement, her eyes shining like stars. "I remember," he repeated.

"He gave me a voice test two weeks ago. I was dreadfully frightened. The broadcasting room gave me a smothered feeling. I imagine that's how it would feel to be in an air-tight drum deep down under the sea. Singing into the microphone was queer. My voice sounded faint and thin. I didn't suppose they'd give me a job."

"I'll bet they never hesitated," John said.

"Today I had lunch with Mr. Vernon and a portly gentleman with a very red face whose name was Mr. Hoffman. He's the manager of the company that makes Heart Balm Soap. I'm to sing on the Heart Balm Soap program at half-past four in the afternoon three days a week."

"Soap?" said John. "That's fine, Lee."

"You don't sound enthusiastic."

"I thought you were going to study."

"I can't just now. There's no use pretending with you. You know that Cousin Eleanor has lost almost everything. And Rickey's illness was expensive."

John regarded her quietly. "It's a good thing they had you, Lee," he said.

"I don't know—" Lee ignored the remark. "Perhaps I wouldn't have been able to sing anyway. Well, I mean. Perhaps I'm being spared a great disappointment," she continued slowly, thoughtfully. "There are so many singers. If you aren't one of the best, you aren't anything. Perhaps it's better to use what talent I have to good advantage and not try to be bigger than I am. You see, I'll have the consolation of thinking that I'm an undiscovered genius."

"Pollyanna," John teased and then said more seriously, "You're right, I guess you're right. Will you have to make a ballyhoo speech for Heart Balm Soap?"

"No. But the program opens with a song that

sounds familiar. The words are awfully silly—

*"Lady, if you've lost all hope,
Buy a bar of Heart Balm Soap*

Something like that. Imagine singing it three days a week!"

"I am," John said grimly.

"But it's only a fifteen-minute program," Lee said cheerfully. "And the salary isn't bad. It isn't quite what I'd hoped. I think all these stories of the millions radio singers get is just a publicity racket. Still, it isn't bad. I can't wait to tell them at home. Rickey will be amused. Aunt Harriet will rave. Cousin Eleanor will say it is all for the best. Clarence will eye me with awe and admiration. He adores the radio."

"Why didn't you tell me?" John asked.

"I've hardly seen you for a month," she said.

"I'm glad you've noticed my absence. That's something anyway. A negative achievement, I must admit. But let us be grateful for—"

"You—you don't like Rickey, do you?"

"Why?"

"You aren't yourself when you're with him. And Rickey isn't, either. You are as glum as an oyster. Rickey shows off. You both make me a little weary."

"Rickey is too handsome," John said lightly. "When I'm with him I think of my cowlick and

my crooked nose and the length of my legs."

"Silly!" Lee laughed, then sighed. "I guess there's no use trying to make the people you like like each other."

"No use at all," John said. "I can't like Rickey. I'm jealous. I want to sock him. I wish duels were the fashion. Swords and pistols." He laughed but his eyes were serious. "I'd like to fight for you. That would be romantic. Would you like that, Lee?"

She looked up at him, her smile fading.

"Haven't you—?" She paused, looked away.

"Haven't I got over you? No, I haven't. That's why I'm going away."

"Going away?"

"I'm going back to Paris."

"Are you, John?" She looked out of the window.

"I might as well. There won't be much building this year. I can work there."

"Judy is in Paris."

"Is she?" John's voice was interested. "Will you give me her address? I'll look her up. We can talk about you."

"I'll miss you, John." She *would* miss him. It made her feel sad to think that John was going away. She couldn't quite realize it. She sat very still, smoothing the fingers of her gloves.

"Come with me, Lee," John said.

"Oh, John. . . ."

"I meant not to ask you again. I haven't any

character. I'm putty in your hands. I've never proposed to you on a train. Has anyone ever?"

She shook her head. He dropped his light, teasing tone.

"I love you, Lee," he said gently. "But don't be unhappy about me. I'll survive. I may even manage to get over you. Don't worry about me."

"I—I'll miss you, John." She raised her head. "I can't tell you how much I'll miss you."

"West Grove!" called the conductor.

Rickey was waiting on the platform.

"Hello!" he called, as Lee followed John.

Lee did not answer. She was only vaguely conscious of Rickey. John helped her down the steps. She held his hand very tightly.

"I—I'll miss you," she said again.

He bent to speak to her softly. "If you find a job for me, I'll come back," he said. "I'll come if you send for me, Lee."

"Won't I see you before you go?"

"I'm afraid not. Just as soon as I can get packed, I'll have to rush off. Probably tomorrow night."

"Bon voyage," Lee said, holding out her hand. "Give my love to Judy."

Chapter Twenty-nine: AUNT HARRIET TALKS AGAIN

"THEY'RE GOING to bloom!" Lee touched the buds of the apple blossoms in a jar in the sunny

window. "They're opening, Aunt Harriet."

"They usually do." Aunt Harriet remained placid. She sat in a rocker near the window, knitting a blouse for Lee. "Somehow or other spring always comes."

"I never really expect it." Lee laughed. "It's always a lovely surprise." She stretched her arms lazily. "I ought to practice. I ought to write letters. I ought to take Eric for a walk."

At the sound of his name, the great Dane sprang up and came bounding to Lee. His tail, joyously wagging, knocked the knitting out of Aunt Harriet's hands.

"That dog!" Aunt Harriet groaned. "He's too big for this cottage. Look at the dropped stitches! Why did John leave him here?"

"Because I like him." Lee dropped to the floor. The dog lay beside her and she stroked his head.

"I'd as soon have an elephant tramping around." Aunt Harriet's expression was severe as she picked up the stitches. "And he eats enough for two full grown men. You're a nuisance," she said to Eric.

"Don't listen to her." Lee laid her cheek against Eric's head. "I like you."

Aunt Harriet repaired the damage that Eric had made. Presently she asked casually, "Is John enjoying life in Paris?"

"I think so," Lee said slowly.

"I can't understand how anybody can," Aunt

Harriet said. "The coffee isn't fit to drink. And the unpleasant custom they have of making you eat one thing at a time. I remember—"

"John sees Judy frequently." Lee stroked Eric's head.

"Does he?" Aunt Harriet looked at the flashing needles. "That's pleasant, I'm sure."

"It's nice for both of them," Lee said slowly. "I'm glad they happen to be there at the same time."

"Are you?"

"Of course," Lee said with unnecessary emphasis.

"You don't sound especially delighted."

"I am. I'd be glad if John and Judy, if Judy and John—"

"Yes?" said Aunt Harriet. She glanced quickly at Lee, saw the far-away expression in her eyes, saw her hand absently stroking Eric's head. "Well, it seems to me—"

The front door opened and closed with a slam. Rickey came into the room. Lee's face brightened a little.

"Any luck?" she asked, looking up.

"Luck!" Rickey flung himself on the sofa.

"Did you go to Barrett Allen's?"

"I've been everywhere." Rickey groaned.

"Nobody wants me. There aren't any jobs."

"Business conditions are bad," Aunt Harriet announced unnecessarily.

"There must be a job somewhere," Lee said. "You can try again tomorrow."

"I'm sick of it!" Rickey burst out. "I'm sick of smiling, of looking bright and alert. I'm sick of being snubbed by office boys."

"I know a remedy for that," Lee said quietly.

"What?" Rickey asked crossly.

"You can go into Judge Walton's office."

Rickey made a sound that was almost a snort.

"You can study for your bar examination," Lee continued. "I think it's the best thing to do."

"You do!" Rickey snapped. "Do you happen to know what he offered to pay me?"

"Not much, I know." Lee continued to stroke Eric's head. "But it's better than nothing. And you would be getting somewhere. If you work, you may be able to take your examination next fall."

"Oh, don't be so optimistic!"

Lee sprang up from the floor, walked out of the room. Aunt Harriet watched her grimly. Her eyes flashed blue lightning at Rickey.

"Lee!" Rickey called, looking ashamed.

Lee did not answer. She ran upstairs and flung herself on the bed, she was hurt and angered by Rickey's outburst. Presently she felt better. She turned over and looked up at the ceiling. Rickey ought not to act so childish, she thought. He ought to be glad that Judge Walton would give him a place in his office. It wouldn't be forever.

Just for a little while. She hadn't meant to irritate him. She had wanted to help him.

He was so easily irritated. Since he had entirely recovered he had been restless and bored. The cottage was too small. They were always getting in each other's way. But it was no worse for Rickey than for the rest of them.

Judy had called him that, a charming, spoiled little boy. Perhaps he was. It wasn't his fault entirely. Cousin Eleanor encouraged it, fussing over him, telling him he wasn't strong.

She herself was almost as bad. You wanted to make things easy for people you loved. It wasn't fair to them, perhaps. It was a form of selfishness. It hurt you to see people you loved unhappy. And so, to escape from being hurt, you made things easy and pleasant for them. Judy had said—

Judy was having a nice time living abroad. She saw John frequently. It would be fun to be in Paris with John. He was so amusing, so interested in everything. She missed him very much. John and Judy, Judy and John— She would be glad if— Would she? She didn't know. She felt confused. Had John got over her? His letters were impersonal. He mentioned Judy very often.

There was a knock at the door.

"Come in," Lee called.

Rickey entered, and came to sit on the side of the bed. He looked white and miserable, dread-

fully ashamed.

"Lee," he said, "I don't know how to begin." He looked at her, looked away. "I know," he said. "Aunt Harriet told me."

"What?" she asked, knowing very well what he meant.

"She told me everything—that you gave Mother the money for my college bills last year, that you paid the nurse and the doctor, that you're keeping that radio job so we can eat."

"Aunt Harriet shouldn't have told you," Lee said slowly.

"I'm glad she did. She certainly opened my eyes." He caught her hands and held them tightly. "Oh, Lee, I'm so ashamed!"

"I wanted to do it," she said.

"Why?" He looked at her humbly, pleadingly. "Why did you do it, Lee?"

"Because I loved you," she said. It was strange to be saying that to Rickey. Was it because it no longer mattered to her as it had?

"Loved me? I don't see how you could."

"It was a habit." She smiled wistfully. "I started when I was six years old."

"Oh, why am I such a failure?"

"Don't feel so badly." Her hand stroked his hair. Presently he raised his head.

"Aunt Harriet told me everything," he said. "She said it was my fault that Mother didn't marry Mr. Connell, that one reason we're so hard up

now is because Mother could never deny me anything."

"That isn't your fault entirely."

"I should have known." Rickey groaned. "What must you think of me? You've given up your chance to sing, you've given me all your money. And what do I amount to? What good am I? I couldn't make a living in New York. I hurt Elaine. I've hurt you. I've just about ruined Mother." His head sank again in his hands. "Lee, darling, help me make it up to you," he said brokenly. "Don't let me go on being a worthless, conceited fool."

She reached over and ran her hand lightly over his bowed head, her heart aching with pity and tenderness.

"Don't, Rickey," she said soothingly. "Don't feel so badly, dear."

"You're fine, Lee." He raised his head. "I need you. I've always needed you. If you give me up I'm lost."

"I won't give you up." Strange that she wasn't happy, that she hadn't the feeling of floating among the stars. She felt only an aching pity, an infinite tenderness, as though he were a child who had hurt himself and had come to her.

"I'll try," he promised. "I'll do my best. I'll go into Judge Walton's office. Will you help me?"

She nodded, her eyes wide and troubled. He bent to kiss the trembling curve of her lips.

"I love you," he said. "I think I always have. Am I worth loving, Lee?"

She couldn't answer. She laid her face against his head. Her throat was dry and aching. She felt as though Rickey had died.

Chapter Thirty: WHAT ARE DREAMS MADE OF?

RICKEY ENTERED upon his new duties with determination, if not with enthusiasm. Eleanor or Lee drove him into West Grove each morning, to the small brick office building which was almost covered with creeping vines. The building had stood in the square, facing the Court House, a great many years. Grandfather Penfield had practiced there when he was Judge Walton's partner. Rickey's father had practiced there before he deserted West Grove to go with a firm in the city.

"It's destiny," Rickey said to Lee one morning, as he stood on the sidewalk beside the car, enjoying a last moment of out-of-door freedom. "I suppose I couldn't have escaped."

"Doesn't it make you proud to be the third Richard Penfield?" Lee asked.

"Proud?" Rickey said seriously, then he smiled. "I'm trying to bear up under the burden."

"Is it a burden, Rickey?"

"My epitaph has already been written," Rickey said. "'He wasn't the man his grandfather was.'"

"Old people always say that." Lee's expression

was indignant. "You can be as fine as Grandfather was if you—" She checked herself abruptly. "There! I'm being optimistic again."

The smile died out of Rickey's eyes. "Haven't you forgiven me?" he asked, touching her hand.

"I was teasing." She avoided his eyes. "Of course I've forgiven you."

Forgiven him? Yes, Lee thought, driving back to Robin Hill. But she hadn't forgotten, quite. Rickey *had* tried to make amends. He had been very gentle with her since the afternoon Aunt Harriet had told him what she had done. He had devoted himself to her.

It was strange that she wasn't happier. Once it would have made her completely blissful to have Rickey really see her, to have him want to be with her. She wasn't blissful now. Something had gone from her feeling for Rickey. She had worshiped him when he was casual, charming, and gay. Now that he was penitent, now that he looked at her humbly, she was unable to feel that happy excitement, that emotion of walking among the stars. What was the matter with her?

The apple trees bloomed and the blossoms fell and drifted away on the wind. Climbing roses framed the windows of the cottage. The air was fragrant with honeysuckle. Summer was well on its dancing way.

Rickey went into the office, faithfully, every day. In the evenings he studied, bending over

ponderous law books, running his hand through his hair. He grew thin and tired-looking. Eleanor fussed over him.

"You mustn't work in the evening," she would say. "You aren't strong yet, darling."

"I'm as strong as a horse."

"Don't you want something cold to drink? Wouldn't you like to take me riding? Can't you wait until the weather is cooler to work over these dreadful books?"

"Oh, Mother, don't fuss!" Rickey would say, his voice sharp with irritation. Then, seeing tears in her eyes, he would kiss her cheek lightly. "I've got to work." And then, to Eleanor's complete bewilderment, he would add, perhaps, "I'm re-writing my epitaph. It's an awful task."

His eyes watched Lee, asking for her approval. She gave it, unstintingly. Rickey never seemed satisfied. She knew he was doing this for her. She wished he would do it for himself, because he wanted to be as fine a man as Grandfather was. He acted as though he were doing a penance, walking over hot plowshares or wearing a hair-cloth shirt. Her heart ached with pity and tenderness. She didn't sleep very well.

There *were* times when she was happy. Sometimes, in the evening, when she sat under the apple trees with Rickey, she would recapture, in a lesser degree, her lost confidence. He would speak of the future, ardently, a future which she

would share with him. He would be very gentle and charming. Held close in his arms, she would tell herself that she was happy. Rickey loved her. There was nothing more that she wanted.

One evening, just before dark, they walked around the big house. It hurt her to see it look so forlorn and neglected. She loved Robin Hill. Once it had been so beautiful—

"You're depressed, Lee," Rickey said.

"I—I guess I'm homesick."

"Homesick?" He drew her hand through his arm.

"Homesick for Robin Hill as it used to be. It doesn't seem possible, does it, that it was ever anything except a wilderness of weeds."

"We'll make it lovely again," Rickey said. "Look, Lee," He pointed to the date-stone "Richard and Shirley Penfield," he said.

"That was Grandfather's Shirley."

"You and I. Richard and Shirley Penfield. I'll make it lovely for you," he said. "We'll—" he broke off abruptly. "You don't believe I can."

"Oh, yes, I do," she said quickly.

"You don't." His eyes were troubled. "I don't blame you. I'm not any good. I'm not worth loving, Lee. What's the matter with me? Elaine wasn't happy. You aren't."

She talked brightly, encouragingly. They restored Robin Hill with words, made additions and improvements. Rickey brightened. He de-

pended so on approval, Lee thought. He couldn't bear criticism. Yet it all seemed possible as they walked through the weeds in the gathering dusk. She saw Robin Hill restored, saw them living there. There would be children playing on the lawn, her children and Rickey's. . . .

Rickey destroyed the picture.

"You can go to New York," he said. "You can live with Judy during the winter."

"Judy?" she said. "I think Judy and John—"

"John interested in Judy?" Rickey asked.

"I'm not sure. They haven't told me." She thought of a snapshot Judy had sent of herself and John. They were smiling. They looked so happy. Judy was almost pretty. The snapshot was enough, she thought.

"John wanted you to marry him, didn't he?" Rickey asked, after a moment of silence.

"Yes," she said, very low.

"You didn't because—?" Rickey paused.

"I couldn't. I'm glad he's got over me," she said lightly, feeling a pain in her heart. "He and Judy—"

"Poor John!" Rickey laughed. "What a life she'll lead him."

"Judy is a darling!" Lee said, a catch in her voice.

"Never mind Judy." Under the arbor, Rickey held her close. "I'm going to make up for everything. You'll have your chance to study." He

held her away to look at her. "You're awfully pretty, Lee. I think I couldn't love Elaine enough because part of me has always belonged to you." He paused and then asked softly, "Do you mind about Elaine?"

"No," she said and knew that it was true. She thought she understood Elaine's letter from Bermuda. Elaine had loved a phantom Rickey. The things she had looked for weren't there. She couldn't bear anything less. Wasn't that true of herself? "I understand," she said.

Walking down from the garage to the cottage late one afternoon, she saw Rickey talking to little Anne Carey, pretty Anne with her short, dark curls, her gypsy coloring, her wide, pansy-dark eyes. A station-wagon in the lane was filled with Anne's friends, boys and girls in bathing suits, laughing, carefree, none of them over eighteen.

Rickey looked young and carefree, too. He hadn't seemed so gay for ever so long. As she watched, Lee saw Anne spring in behind the wheel, saw her wave to Rickey, saw the station-wagon careen along the lane. She went on to the cottage veranda.

"Hello," she called.

Rickey turned. His face lost the gay, charming look. "Hello," he answered.

"Why didn't you go?" Lee asked.

"Where?"

"With Anne. What was it? A picnic?"

"I can't play around with youngs," Rickey said lightly. "I've got to study tonight. I'm re-writing my epitaph."

He looked for her approval. Lee saw his eyes watch her anxiously.

"Don't do it just for me," she said. "I don't ask you—"

"You don't ask anything. I wish you would. Can't I kill a dragon for you? I want to do something hard to make up for all you've done for me."

"Don't be grateful, Rickey." Lee's hand touched his sleeve. "That spoils everything."

He pulled away from her roughly. "You don't know what it's like to be humiliated!" he burst out.

"I'm sorry," Lee said, in a quiet voice.

He turned to her swiftly, his anger gone. "Forgive me, Lee," he said brokenly. "I wouldn't hurt you for the world. Be patient with me. Let me get back my self-respect."

She was patient with him. It seemed incredible that she could feel herself being patient with Rickey. A year ago— Nothing remained the same. She had changed. Rickey had changed. John had changed. He had got over her.

Rickey was restless, too. As the summer days passed, he seemed to avoid her. He went, in the evening, to his room. He didn't always work over his law books. Lee was sure of that. Sometimes

she heard him walking back and forth. One evening she went up to call him to the telephone. Rickey was asleep, his arms flung over an open atlas, his cheek resting on the continent of Europe.

He looked very young asleep, his blond hair rumpled, his cheeks flushed from the warmth of the room. He looked, she thought, like a little boy who had gone to sleep over a geography, dreaming, perhaps, of adventures in strange, exciting countries. Lee felt a lump in her throat. Bending swiftly, she kissed his forehead, a light kiss of tenderness, as though he *were* a little boy.

One evening, when he came out from West Grove, there was a letter waiting for him. He read it on the porch, tilting his chair back against the wall. Lee, helping Eleanor set the table for supper out-of-doors under the apple trees, saw his face brighten as he read. He did not speak of it until very much later when they sat on the porch alone.

"I had a letter from Bob Marshall," he said.

"Yes?" Lee roused from a maze of thoughts.

"He's going to Florida to manage his father's groves. He wants me to go with him."

"Would you like that, Rickey?" Lee asked.

"I think I would," he said. "There'd be sunshine and horses to ride and swimming and working outdoors." His voice tightened. "I hate the office, Lee. Do you think I could make a success

of managing an orange grove?"

"I don't know," she said.

"You think I couldn't." He came to sit on the steps beside her. "You used to believe in me. You don't now, do you?"

"Rickey, please," she said wearily. "Don't let's go all over that again."

"I know I'm a nuisance," he said bitterly. "But if you don't believe in me—"

"I do," she said. "I think you can do anything if you stop thinking so much of yourself."

"I can't help thinking. I'm so worthless." He reached for her hand. "Let's go to Florida, Lee."

She laughed, a brief laugh, quickly stilled.

"What are you thinking?" he asked.

"How would we get there, Rickey? Walk?"

His enthusiasm wilted. "I know," he said. "I couldn't even pay your train fare or buy a Model T Ford. I was just talking, I guess."

He rose abruptly, went into the cottage. Lee sat on the porch alone, hugging her knees in her arms. Poor Rickey! she thought, watching the apricot moon float up into the sky. She wanted to help him. But she had already done too much.

Eric came around the corner of the house, lay beside her, thrust his huge head into her lap.

"Where's John?" she asked softly.

The dog raised his head, looked around, sniffed, nuzzled into her lap. She laid her cheek against his head.

"I miss him, too," she said. "Do you think—if we sent for him . . .?"

Chapter Thirty-one: ASHES TO ASHES

ROBIN HILL was to be sold. There was no other way of smoothing out Eleanor's tangled affairs. Even that course seemed doubtful.

"It's hard to sell houses this year," Judge Walton said, talking over the matter in the living-room of the cottage. "I'm afraid it won't bring half what it's worth. But if we can clear the mortgages and pay the bills, it will be very much better than letting things run on."

Lee knew that the Judge was right. With her head she hoped that the place would be sold, but her heart rebelled. Sell Robin Hill! The thought was unbearable. And yet, somehow, she must bear it. Strangers would move through the familiar rooms. Strangers would watch the pear tree blossom in the spring, smell the fragrance of the lilacs, hear the robins chirping on the lawn. Strangers! She hoped they would treat the old place kindly. She loved it so very much.

Almost overnight, the wheels began to turn. A sign was posted on the gate. Lee saw, wherever she went, the big red letters *For Sale*. Men with a motor-driven mower cut the long grass on the lawns, trimmed the shrubbery, made temporary repairs. It seemed different already with stran-

gers moving about. In the cottage Lee could hear the hum of the grass mower. She felt as though it was running over her heart.

Setting the house in order was a trying ordeal. Lee went through the rooms with Eleanor and Aunt Harriet, making lists of the things which Eleanor was to keep, the things that were to be left for the sale. Eleanor wept a great deal. Her eyelids were always pink. There was always a damp ball of handkerchief in her hand. She delayed the work with tearful reminiscence.

"I remember when Richard bought this for me," she would say, touching a mirror, a chair, a fragile, costly ornament.

Or—

"Richard had the drawing-room done over for our tenth wedding anniversary. I had a rose-colored velvet dress. It went so well with the silver and green of the upholstery. Rickey came downstairs in his pajamas and stuffed himself full of cake and punch. He was very, very sick."

In the attic they found a pile of magazines, *House Beautiful*, *House and Garden*.

"Why did we keep these?" Eleanor asked. "Oh, I know." She sat on the floor, turned the pages.

"These are the photographs that were taken when the place was done over after Father Penfield died. Look, Lee! Look, Aunt Harriet! Wasn't it lovely then?"

It *was* lovely. There was the fountain and the

hemlock hedge. There was the paved court under the linden tree, the long shadows of the elms lying across the lawn. There was the paneled dining-room. There was Cousin Eleanor, looking as though she hadn't known her picture was being taken. And in letters underneath—

MRS. RICHARD GOULD PENFIELD, II
THE CHARMING MISTRESS
OF
ROBIN HILL

"I was pretty then, wasn't I?" Eleanor asked wistfully. "What would Richard think of this? He wanted me to be happy."

One day, when the flood of reminiscence was especially trying, Aunt Harriet rather sharply told Eleanor not to be silly.

"You don't understand," Eleanor said, reproachfully. "It's so sad to lose one's home."

"It was my home before it was yours." Aunt Harriet's voice was sharp with grief. "I was born in the front room on the second floor. I was married on the lawn. If I can stand it, I guess you can. Make up your mind whether or not you want to keep this rosewood sewing-table."

Aunt Harriet was unteeling, Eleanor confided to Lee. She didn't seem to care that Robin Hill was being sold. People grew less sensitive with age, perhaps. She did try to be patient with Aunt

Harriet. But, really, there were times—

Lee knew that Aunt Harriet cared. She saw her touch the furniture as though it were alive. The more she scolded, the more she grieved. Oh, yes, Aunt Harriet cared.

Rickey was furious at first, then bitter, then resigned.

"There's nothing else to be done," he said to Lee one evening. They were in the upstairs sitting-room, looking through an accumulation of books. "I hate losing the place. People who were never invited here are condescending already. It seems like the end of everything. But there's nothing else to be done."

Lee sat back on the floor, clasped her knees in her arms. Her eyes moved slowly around the room.

"This used to be the school room," she said sadly, dreamily. "The wallpaper was bunches of roses tied with stiff blue bows. Do you remember, Rickey? There were pictures of children with rabbits. Do you remember the sofa? The springs were broken from bouncing. The piano was there where the desk is now."

"Don't, Lee," Rickey protested.

"Cousin Eleanor used to play," Lee continued, ignoring the interruption. "Do you remember, Rickey? I can see you now, your face bright red from shouting. I can see Grandfather keeping time with the toe of his boot." She sang softly,

half aloud—

*"The animals had a fair
The birds and the beasts were there
The gay baboon—"*

Her voice broke. Sobbing, she dropped her head on her knees.

"Don't, Lee." Rickey's arms held her close. "Please don't cry."

She couldn't stop crying. She cried because her feeling for Rickey had changed, because she could never be very happy or very unhappy about Rickey again. It was sad to feel only tenderness for him, tenderness and pity.

"Please, Lee. Darling—"

Rickey was calling her "darling." It didn't matter now. She couldn't swallow the choking sobs. She cried because Robin Hill was to be sold, because John had got over her, because she would never really sing. Her sobs sounded loud in the quiet room. They had been so happy there once. She wished she were a child again. She couldn't bear to get over loving Rickey. She couldn't bear to have strangers living at Robin Hill.

Presently her sobs lost their violence. She lifted her head, childishly brushed away the tears.

"Feel better?" Rickey asked.

She nodded.

"Don't mind it so dreadfully, Lee." Rickey tried to comfort her. "I've been thinking. If the place is sold and there's any money over—"

"Don't!" Her voice sounded unfamiliar, sharp and almost shrill. She sprang to her feet, ran out of the room, down the stairs, through the back door, out under the arbor. Rickey could talk calmly about selling the place. "If there's any money over . . ." That was sensible, of course. This wasn't the end of the world.

Rickey had been so casual. He didn't care as she did. She wanted him to care. "People were condescending." It was only his pride that was hurt. His heart wasn't breaking because strangers would live at Robin Hill.

Elaine had wanted Rickey to care. She felt deep sympathy for Elaine. She, too, had wanted from Rickey something which wasn't there. His surface charm was deceiving. You felt that there must be something beneath. There wasn't. "Charming, magnetic, shallow," Aunt Harriet had said. He was merely charming, a spoiled little boy. It wasn't his fault entirely. Too late to think of that.

The back door opened and closed. Lee heard Rickey call her name. She lay very still, almost holding her breath. She didn't want Rickey to find her. She didn't want to see him tonight.

His voice grew faint in the distance. Lee lay in the tall grass under the pear tree.

Chapter Thirty-two: ROBIN HILL HAS A NEW OWNER

LEE WALKED down Chestnut street, a small, graceful figure in a frock of thin summer silk. People glanced at her admiringly. The city was sweltering in the heat of middle August. In her broad-brimmed hat and lilac frock Lee was a refreshing sight.

Lee was not conscious of admiring glances. Her mind was busy with conjectures. She was going to have lunch with Mr. Connell. She had had a letter from him nearly a week ago. Why had he invited her to lunch? What did it mean?

She saw him at once when she entered the lobby of the hotel. He rose from a chair near the door, looking just as she had remembered him. He wore a gray suit as he had when she had seen him last. There was a flower in his coat lapel.

"How do you do," he said, smiling, extending his hand.

How big he was! She had to tilt her head back to see his face.

"I wasn't sure you would know me," she said.

"Not know you?" His gray eyes beamed with pleasure under his shaggy brows. "I think anyone who had seen you would always remember."

"Thank you," she said, feeling suddenly, pleasantly, at ease with him.

"Let's go up to the roof for lunch," he said.

"It's cooler there than anywhere else in the city."

An obsequious waiter seated them at a table near the window. The wind blew the thin gauze curtain. The sounds of the city were faint and far away. Mr. Connell ordered lunch. Lee peeled off her gloves, looked at Mr. Connell, looked at the coral pink geraniums outside the window.

"And now let me look at you," Mr. Connell said when the waiter had disappeared. "You're thinner, aren't you? I didn't remember that your eyes were so big."

"I've been singing over the radio," she said. "Three afternoons a week. It's been so hot in the city."

"I know. I've heard you," he said.

"Where?" she asked, surprised and pleased.

"Chicago, Los Angeles, New Orleans—"

"I never think when I'm singing," she said, "that people can hear me everywhere. It's always a surprise."

"I've never missed the Heart Balm Soap program," Mr. Connell said, "except when I was obliged to."

"That's very flattering. I've liked doing it. But it's been dreadfully warm."

"That's why your eyes are so big?"

"Other things, too." Lee looked down at the table. "We're— Robin Hill is to be sold."

"I know that, too," Mr. Connell said quietly. "It hurts you, doesn't it?"

She nodded, unable to speak. The waiter set silver shells of fruit before them.

"I want to talk to you about Robin Hill." Mr. Connell seemed embarrassed. "I'm going to buy it," he said.

Lee looked up at him swiftly, her lips parted.

"I thought it was perfect when I saw it last."

"It's been neglected." Lee felt a lump in her throat. "We're living in the gardener's cottage."

"Yes," he said. "I know that, too." His embarrassment increased. "Will it hurt you very much if I buy the place?"

"It hurts," Lee said slowly. "But I'd much rather you would have it than any of the people who've come poking around."

"What are Mrs. Penfield's plans?" He asked after a moment.

"She and Rickey are going away. Rickey didn't finish at law school. A friend of his has offered him a position in Florida. I think, if the place is sold, they're going there."

"And you? Don't think it's merely curiosity. I have a reason for asking."

"Aunt Harriet and I will take a house in West Grove. I'm going on with my job."

"Could you manage another?" he asked.

She glanced up, a question in her eyes.

"I'd like you to put Robin Hill in shape for me. Get an architect, anyone you need. Make it look as you would like it to look if you were to

live there yourself. There will be no question of the expense. I haven't gone through this crash without a scratch. But there's plenty left. Will you do it for me?"

Lee felt as though she were dreaming. Things like this didn't really happen.

"I won't be there a great deal," Mr. Connell continued. "But I want to keep it open. We can find a housekeeper, servants. Do you know a competent architect, one who would get the feeling of the place?"

Her thoughts flew to John. "If you find a job for me," he had said.

"Yes," she said, feeling her cheeks grow warm, feeling a strange excitement, queer and breathless and lovely. "Yes," she said slowly. "If I can get him—if he will come—"

"It pleases you, doesn't it?" Mr. Connell asked. "Your cheeks are pink. Your eyes are shining."

"Indeed it does." She leaned impulsively across the table. "I do thank you so much."

"It is I who should thank you," Mr. Connell said gravely. "Do you wonder why I am doing this? You do, of course. That's only natural. I'm not sure that I can explain. Let us say that it's because I have never had a home. I think that no matter where I am it will give me pleasure to know that Robin Hill belongs to me. I had hoped for something different—"

He paused. Lee glanced up, saw the thought-

ful expression in his eyes.

"I think I understand," she said shyly.

"I'm sure you do." He cleared his throat. "And when I'm gone, when I shall have no further use for Robin Hill—" He broke off, smiled, bent over the table to touch her hand. "We won't speak of that today. I expect to live for a good long time. Where's that waiter?"

The rest of the luncheon passed like a dream. Lee scarcely tasted the food. The orchestra played a succession of dream-like tunes. Mr. Connell told her the name of the Philadelphia lawyer who would take care of the bills for restoring Robin Hill. He talked of places he had been. He asked her what she would like for dessert.

Lee heard herself making appropriate remarks. They had nothing to do with her mind. It was composing a letter to John, the letter she would write as soon as she reached home. Would he come? Would he bring Judy with him? He would make Robin Hill so lovely. Would she really see him, hear his voice? John. . . .

She blinked in the glare of the street. The doorman called a taxi. Mr. Connell closed the door.

"The Suburban Station," he told the driver. Then he turned to Lee. "You don't mind my owning Robin Hill?" he asked. "Will it make you happy to restore it, to make it lovely again?"

"Oh, yes," she said, her eyes shining, her cheeks

warmly flushed. "I can't tell you how much."

The taxi plunged into the traffic. Lee looked through the back window, saw Mr. Connell standing at the curb, looking so big and so kind in his spruce gray suit with a flower in his coat lapel. Her eyes filled with happy tears.

She would write to John tonight. How soon might she expect an answer? But she needn't wait to write. She leaned over and touched the chauffeur's shoulder.

"Take me to the nearest telegraph office," she said, feeling again that queer, tingling excitement.

The chauffeur gave her an admiring glance tossed back over his shoulder.

"Yes, Miss," he said and slid in to the curb.

Chapter Thirty-three: —DUST TO DUST

"I OUGHT to go in and start to pack. I'll never be ready to leave next week." Eleanor stirred in her chair. "But it's so pleasant here."

"Mmmm!" Lee agreed.

"Rickey won't be home until late, I suppose. He's dancing somewhere with Anne Carey."

"I don't envy them," Lee said lazily. "It's too warm to dance."

"I encouraged him to go. He's been so worried, poor darling. He hates the idea of Mr. Connell buying the place. Rickey takes dislikes to

people." She sighed and then said, "I think Mr. Connell has been very generous. Judge Walton says there'll be something over after everything is paid. He advised me to put that away for a rainy day."

"It never rains in Florida, does it? That's what I've been led to believe."

"It seems odd to think that Robin Hill belongs to Mr. Connell now," Eleanor said vaguely. "I'll miss it so. When I think—"

"Don't," Lee said gently.

"But I know I'll love Florida," Eleanor said more brightly. "We're to have one of those adorable Spanish houses. I think I won't have our furniture shipped down just at first. It won't be suitable for a Spanish house. Furniture isn't expensive now. I think I'll buy everything new. It would be cheaper in the end if you consider—"

"Cousin Eleanor!" Lee laughed and sighed.

"I'm sure it will be splendid for Rickey there," Eleanor continued. "Office work is so confining. He's never really got over his illness of last winter. He'll be better off working out-of-doors. Well, I simply must go in and get things together." She rose from the low chair.

"I'll miss you, too," she said, seating herself on the footrest of Lee's chair. "You won't change your mind about coming with us?"

"No," Lee said firmly.

"I had thought," Eleanor said, "that Rickey

was getting fond of you. Not that he hasn't always been." She gave an embarrassed laugh. "But in a different way, I mean. Of course some people think it isn't right for cousins to marry. It makes the children queer or something. You and Rickey are only third cousins. I thought—I had hoped," she said wistfully.

Lee shook her head. She smiled up at Eleanor. "Be happy," she said.

"I'm sure I shall." Eleanor rose again. "I'll have two big boys to take care of. Bob is so jolly and nice. Alicia Carey says you can get servants for almost nothing in Florida. I know we'll love it there." She took a few steps toward the cottage, paused, and turned again to Lee. "Will you send me pictures of Robin Hill when it's all done over? I should like to see it looking stately again."

"I will," Lee promised.

"We'll send you pictures of our new home. Bob wrote Rickey that there's a patio. Doesn't it sound intriguing?" She raised her head. Lee thought that her face looked very white in the deepening dusk. "Good night, dear. Happy dreams."

"You have them, too."

"I shall dream of the patio." Eleanor smiled and went into the cottage.

Lee lay back in the chair, her hand on Eric's head. The dusk deepened into night. Through the foliage of the apple trees she saw the sky sprinkled over with stars.

Was John coming? she wondered. She had sent him the cablegram over two weeks ago. He hadn't answered. She had lived in a state of expectancy. She had even watched the shipping news in the papers. He might not have received her message. He might not have been in Paris. Would he bring Judy with him? It would serve her exactly right. She had been so stupid, a silly, romantic child. She had known that she loved John the day on the train when he said he was going away. She wouldn't admit it.

Someone was coming down the lane, whistling a dance tone. Her heart leaped, sank swiftly again. She saw that it was Rickey.

"Hello!" she called.

The whistling stopped. Rickey came toward her, dropped into the chair beside her own.

"You're home early, aren't you?" she asked.

"I didn't want to go. I got away as soon as I could." He leaned toward her. "Lee," he said, "won't you come with me to Florida?"

She drew away.

"No," she said. "You don't want me to, Rickey, really deep down in your heart."

"I do," he protested.

"Tell me the truth. I don't want anything else."

He was silent. Then he said brokenly, "Forgive me, Lee. I don't know."

"I know. I've known it ever since Aunt Har-

riet told you what I had done."

"Why don't I?" he asked miserably. "You've been so good to me, Lee."

"Too good," she said slowly. "That's the trouble. I've made you feel obligated. I shouldn't have. I didn't know. You aren't comfortable with me. You feel humiliated."

"What's the matter with me?" Rickey buried his face in his hands. "Elaine asked for everything. You asked nothing. I couldn't make either of you happy. Will I always be like this?"

"You'll feel better when you're away. Everything will be new and fresh." She laughed.

He caught her hand, held it tightly.

"You're so lovely, Lee," he said huskily. "Don't give me up entirely. Send your bright thoughts flying south to me. They'll find me. I'll know. Don't stop being fond of me."

"I can't, Rickey," she said softly. "It's a habit. It's something I can't seem to help."

He kissed the palm of her hand.

"Sir Faithful," he said.

Chapter Thirty-four: REBIRTH OF DELIGHT

LEE MOVED through the empty rooms of the old stone house. Eric walked at her side. Late afternoon sunshine, slipping in through the shutters, lay in dusty bars on the floors. The house had a musty, closed-up smell.

Ghosts moved with her through the quiet rooms: Grandfather Penfield, Cousin Richard, Cousin Eleanor, Rickey. Ghosts of herself: a shy little girl with grave blue eyes; an older Lee, happy because she knew she was going to be pretty; Lee at sixteen, falling in love with Rickey; a grown-up Lee, loving a phantom Rickey, weaving a fairy tale that she thought was real. She saw them clearly, the ghosts of herself, growing up at Robin Hill.

She saw everything clearly now, she thought as she walked down the shadowy stairs. She had made Rickey impossibly magnificent. She had loved, not Rickey himself, but a Rickey she had imagined, the Rickey she wanted him to be. It hurt to know that the Rickey she loved had never existed. It was like losing a part of herself.

She shouldn't have done so much for him. She realized that now. No one liked having to be grateful. But what else could she have done? She had thought that getting his degree from Harvard meant everything to Rickey. It hadn't. But how could she have foreseen? And when he was ill what else could she have done except help to take care of him and pay the bills?

There was nothing more that she could do for Rickey. Helping too much had made that impossible. Rickey must help himself now. He seemed to like the work in Florida. He had written her an amusing letter. Away from her he could for-

get how much she had done for him. Cousin Eleanor seemed happy. She was buying furniture for the Spanish house with the patio, "for a song," she wrote to Lee.

Rickey must help himself now. Lee wandered into the library. Success or failure, that lay within himself. He would be happy. There would be girls to admire him, girls like Anne Carey who made him feel important. He would marry a girl like Anne, perhaps. Rickey had to be admired. Elaine hadn't been able to admire him, except just at first. Elaine had seen him clearly. How could she have hated Elaine?

Lee's thoughts returned to the house. She ran her fingers across the rows of dusty books. They were to remain at Robin Hill. The dealer who had bought them had sold them back to her. To her? To Mr. Connell. Mr. Connell owned them now, Grandfather's books, Cousin Richard's books. She was glad they were to be there in the shelves that had been built for them.

Would John think the library should be changed? John— Why hadn't he sent an answer to her cablegram? Four weeks had passed since the day she'd had luncheon with Mr. Connell. Wasn't John coming back to help her restore Robin Hill? She had been excited when she sent the cablegram, a queer, lovely excitement, thinking that John would return. He hadn't even sent her a message. Why had she let him go?

She went out of the library and across the hall into the living-room. Eric padded behind her, his feet making scratching sounds on the floor. The paneling would have to be re-painted, she thought. There might be Venetian blinds at the windows. Wasn't John coming back to her? Were John and Judy—? Were Judy and John—?

The piano stood in the music room. She had bought it back from Anne Victoria Phillips. Lee sat on the piano bench, opened the dusty lid, ran her fingers over the keys. She thought of the evening she sang for Mr. Connell. How understanding he had been. Lee's fingers, running over the keys, played the melody of "Mavourneen." In the meantime—what? She and Aunt Harriet would take a house in West Grove. She would go on with her music when she had saved enough. Perhaps she would return to Robin Hill after a successful career. Perhaps— But she knew that Aunt Harriet had been right. A career would not be enough for her. Why had she let John go?

Eric growled deep in his throat. Lee's hands slipped away from the keys. She heard the front door open, heard footsteps in the hall. Eric bounded out of the room, barking.

"Down, Eric!" a voice said.

John's voice! Lee rose from the piano bench, started to go into the hall, stood beside the piano holding tightly to the lid. A moment passed. Was it a moment? It seemed a lifetime of uncertainty.

And then John was at the door, looking at her, his lips smiling, his dark eyes grave.

"Hello," he said. "Aunt Harriet said you were here."

"Hello," she answered. Her voice, to her, sounded faint and unfamiliar.

"Aren't you glad to see me?" John came toward her across the room.

"Yes," she said. "Oh, yes, I am."

"Not as glad as Eric is. Down, old man! You're ruining my brand-new suit."

Lee drew a breath. She had to know. "Where is Judy?" she asked.

"Judy?" John seemed surprised at the question. "In England, I think. She sent you a sixpence."

"A sixpence? Why?"

"There are gaps in your education, sweet." John caught her in his arms, held her away from him to look down into her eyes. "It's considered lucky," he said, "for a bride to wear a sixpence in her slipper."

"Judy sent it? For me?"

"Yes, darling. Why?"

Her face was against his shoulder. His arms tightened around her, held her very close,

"I thought," she said in a muffled voice. "I thought that you and Judy, that Judy and you—"

"Little idiot!" John said softly, his lips against her hair.

DIAGRAM OF THE PENFIELD PLACE
SCENE OF ROMANCE IN
"ROBIN HILL"

BROOK

HOUSE

BARN

MEADOWS

GARDENS

POND

TOOL SHED

TO CAREY'S

GARDENER'S
COTTAGE

ORCHARD

ROAD

TO DOWLINGS



A
DELL
BOOK